

# JEEVADHARA

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## SOCIAL THRUST AS A PROPHETIC CALL

SOCIAL CRITICISM AS THE PROPHETIC ROLE;  
A BIBLICAL PROLEGOMENON

*Paul Kalluveettil*

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PERESTROIKA  
IN PROTO-ISAIAH

*T. A. Joseph*

THE MINOR PROPHETS AS CONSCIENTIZERS

*R. Vande Walle*

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EXPERIENCE OF PROPHETIC SOLIDARITY

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**JEEVADHARA**

# **The Word of God**

**SOCIAL THRUST AS A PROPHETIC CALL**

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## Editorial

"Ahab is born anew everyday and never vanishes from the world — Everyday Naboth is condemned, everyday the poor man is struck down." (De Nabuthe 1:1 — Commentary on I Kings 21) These paradigmatic words of St. Ambrose poignantly expose the structural evils of modern society. The countries are socially stratified with economics of affluence, politics of exploitation and static religion of triumphalism as their basic structures. Man/woman is conceived and fashioned in the image and likeness of idols of wealth and products of consumerism and commerce, greed and violence, selfishness and sexuality. A new gospel is propagated — the good news of wealth, sports, films and drugs. Human growth is measured in terms of accumulation and aggrandisement. Possessions seem to serve as deities providing the persons with significance and security. The spirit of affluence seems to allure even religious communities. For some of them financial security looms large as the true providence.

We live in a culture that lusts for things, where property is divinized. It creates wealth and power for a minority, thereby generating poverty and dependence for the great majority of the nations. The free market economy has increased the gap between the rich and the poor. Countries are forced to win their independence in conditions that cannot obtain the basic human needs. Newly freed nations are systematically prevented from consolidating their political independence. They are kept economically dependent on the power of capitalist and socialist systems. World Capital is concentrated and centralized

in the hands of a few developed countries. The price of raw materials which are the basic produce of the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, has not increased in comparison with the price of finished goods from the industrialised nations. The trading figures of the developed countries go up at the expense of the so-called Third World. Because of this unjust balance of trade Europe and the United States of America amass wealth - and greater wealth means greater power, as might makes right! To illustrate the inequality in the distribution of goods, U. S. A., for example, with 6% of the world population consume almost 40% of the world's produce. The annual consumption per head in Switzerland almost equals that of 23 people in India. As a result of this gluttoned opulence and hedonistic and narcotic tendencies of the West, human beings are disenfranchised, depersonalized and merchandized. There follows the fragmentation of relationships, the splintering of community and family. At the same time most of the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America spend their lives in appalling conditions of abject poverty without basic amenities. Most of these countries have contracted enormous debts which have mortgaged their future for decades to come. Still they, at the instigation of industrialised nations, are spending millions of dollars on armaments. And new weapon technologies are being developed; armament industry has become the chief consumer of financial resources. The overseas aid which is proclaimed as a means to eradicate poverty, actually serves as a subtle and effective method of exploitation.

The structural marginalization has the upper hand in the society of India, the abode of 15% of the world's population. The Constitution of India avows justice, liberty, equality and fraternity to be the fundamental rights of every Indian citizen. But India provides the fertile ground for all kinds of social evils. According to an official report, 40.4% of rural and 28.1% of urban population of India were below



the poverty line in 1983 - 84. Over 2.5 million people spend their entire lives in pavements. There are twenty million bonded labourers. Illiteracy is no less than 63%. Health and educational facilities are mostly the privilege of a handful of the upper-strata of society. Education is embedded in the capitalistic politico-economic structure. Thus it fails to bring out a qualitative and structural change in the Indian society. There reign alienation, segregation and fragmentation in today's caste-ridden India. Communalism, regionalism, fundamentalism, corruption and discrimination are rampant in the society. Child labour, unemployment and dowry deaths remain as ever recurring phenomena.

In this global/Indian context we turn to the Bible. Is the Word of God still relevant in the modern world? Isaiah positively responds: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands for ever" (40:8). Yes, the word-event is capable of shaping a new reality. "I am making everything new." (Rev. 21:5) Indeed, we can confront the Indian society with the Biblical ideal which is God's vision of his world. The word-hammer can shatter the rock (cf. Jer. 23:29) of structural sinfulness in the existing world economic system. Indian soul groans inwardly and waits in agony for the liberative action (cf. Rom.8:22-23) of the ever powerful Word of God (cf. Is. 55:10-11). The marginalized masses look for prophets who can wake the Word, release the irrupting power of the Word which will consume the undivine and inhuman socio-political and cultic-cultural structures of the modern society.

This Biblical issue of *Jeevadhara* is devoted to project the social thrust as a prophetic call. The study is unfortunately not comprehensive; it does not critically deal with the whole Bible from the socio-prophetic perspective. We let the dynamics of divine liberation and the marginalizing dialectics

of the Bible speak to us so that Mary's prophetic words of social upheaval may incarnate in us.

“He has shown strength with his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination  
of their hearts,  
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
he has filled the hungry with good things  
and the rich he has sent away empty.”

Paul Kalluveettil



# **Social and Political Perestroika in Proto-Isaiah**

## **Introductory**

This is a search into Isaiah, the social critic. We shall let the text speak for itself, trying to know what we see rather than to see what we know or want to see. Isaiah, the man and the prophet, his sympathy with God and compassion for his people, will come out in this study. The complex questions of the authenticity of the text and chronology in Isaiah are not taken up as most of his social criticism appears in chapters 1-5 belonging to the early period, though ch. 1 may be earlier. The study of prophecy and society in ancient Israel so far has centered on the areas of social functions, the nature and social location of prophecy<sup>1</sup>. The work of Isaiah is seen from these angles, at least in a general way. The RSV translation is generally followed except when necessary to bring out the force of the language in the original; translation is made with recourse to the Hebrew text<sup>2</sup>. For the benefit of the readers not familiar with Hebrew, only one form of the Hebrew word is given generally even when the text uses verbal, adjectival or other forms. To save space, poetry is written continuously, with the mark (/) separating the lines of the verses.

## **I. Social criticism in Isaiah**

### **1.1 Prophecy as a literary genre**

As in Amos and Micah, in Isaiah too a kind of prophecy with a harsh reproach on social injustice dominates, e.g., the first of the woes in chapter 5:

- A) Woe to those who join house to house,/ who add field to field,/ until there is no more room,/ and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land./

- B) The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing:/ "Surely many houses shall be desolate,/ large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant./ For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,/ and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah." 5: 8-10

Here we have a clear-cut example of the specific type of prophetic utterance, which we call the genre of prophecy. It consists of mainly two parts, first, *an indication of the situation* (A), and second, after a transitional formula, *a prediction* (B). What is especially noticeable in prophecy as a genre is the sharp dividing line between present and future, between A and B. The prophet, using keywords in both the parts, like 'house' and 'land' in the case above, lays stress on a logical connection with previous history<sup>3</sup>.

Here Isaiah is pronouncing a woe (*hoy*) on 'latifundism' or what we call land-grabbing, of both houses and fields. This was part of the socio-economic revolution that took place both in Israel and Judah. It transformed the people from a society of small landowners living in equality to a much more highly stratified society in which there was a contrast between the rich and the poor, in which the poor had lost their rights and independence and could only subsist by serving the former — perhaps often as labourers or as slaves, on the land they had formerly owned. To Isaiah this was a very evil situation, created by some members of Yahweh's people exploiting others, forgetting what it meant to be Yahweh's people. He repeats the Lord's solemn oath against these exploiters: the desolation to come will not allow them to enjoy the fruit of their wickedness. Even the land will lose its fertility yielding a much lesser return.

## 1.2 Isaian overture

Significantly, the speech which prefaces the book of Isaiah, and which sets the tone for all the utterances by the prophet, consists of three rebukes which describe the sin of Judah and Jerusalem in various figures and allusions and the corresponding great punishment: vv 2-9; 10-20; 21-28<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.2.1 Zion's harlotry: loss of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*)

We begin with the third rebuke:

- A) How the faithful city has become a harlot,/ she that was full of justice!/ Righteousness lodged in her,/but now murderers./ Your silver has become dross,/ your wine mixed with water./ Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves./ Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts./ They do not defend the fatherless,/ and the widow's cause does not come to them.
- B) Therefore the Lord says,/ the Lord of hosts,/ the Mighty One of Israel:/ "Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies,/ and avenge myself on my foes./ I will turn my hand against you/ and will smelt away your dross as with lye/ and remove all your alloy./ And I will restore your judges as at the first,/ and your counsellors as at the beginning./ Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,/ the faithful city."/ Zion shall be redeemed by justice,/ and those in her who repent, by righteousness./ But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together/ and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed/ 1:21-28.

The prophet expresses sorrow at the corruption of the faithful city which from being the home of justice and righteousness has now become the home of murderers. Her princes and judges instead of defending orphans and widows are corrupted through bribes and gifts which they seek. While Amos condemned the injustices against the poor (*dallim*) in the sense of small holders, Isaiah enlarges the criticism to include the injustice against those who are poor in the modern sense of the word, namely the widows and the orphans. Hence the Lord will vent his wrath on his enemies, i.e., the perpetrators of injustice, and on the city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and the repentant in her by righteousness, after being purified by the Lord. But those who forsake Yahweh shall be consumed.

This oracle is noteworthy in the sense that it speaks not only of sin and its punishment, but that the punishment can have not only a destructive purpose but also a medicinal and redemptive one. The sin, the harlotry of Zion is depicted in terms of social injustice, in terms of the loss of the paired concepts of *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*. The restoration is also presented in terms of the restoration of the same.

*Love song of the vineyard – Judah's loss of mishpat and tsedaqah*



We find the same emphasis on justice and righteousness also in the love song that Isaiah sings for his beloved concerning his vineyard. This time it involves the sin of the nation and not merely the city. The prophet speaks first in his own name vv 1-2, then as the voice of God vv 3-6 and again in his own name v 7:

- A) Let me sing for my beloved/ a love song concerning his vineyard:/ My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill./ He dugged it and cleared it of stones,/ and planted it with choice vines;/ he built a watchtower in the midst of it,/ and hewed out a winevat in it;/ and he looked for it to yield grapes,/ but it yielded wild grapes./ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,/ judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard./ What more was there to do for my vineyard,/ that I have not done in it?/ When I looked for it to yield grapes,/ why did it yield wild grapes?/
- B) And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard./ I will remove its hedge,/ and it shall be devoured;/...
- C) For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,/ and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting;/ and he looked for justice,/ but behold, bloodshed;/ for righteousness,/ but behold, an outcry! 5:1-7
- (C is a concluding characterization found sometime.)

Isaiah wants to underline Judah's wicked behaviour by contrasting it with the loving care lavished by Yahweh; and he says that this nurturing care will now be replaced with destructive judgment. He will abandon his people to their enemies and allow the land to return to its wild, uncultivated state.

In the prophet's explanation of the parable (v 7), he identifies the nation's crime as social injustice. Just as wild grapes might look like good grapes, so Isaiah with a word-play uses words that *sound* like the real thing: in place of *mishpat* his people present him with *mispah* (bloodshed) and in place of *tsedaqah*, *tse'aqah* (outcry) of the exploited poor<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.2.2 Cult bereft of justice (*mishpat*)

The second rebuke:

- A) Hear the word (*dabar*) of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!/  
... "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?/

says the Lord;/ I have had enough of burnt offerings .../  
 ... New moon and sabbath and the calling of as-  
 semblies-/ I cannot endure iniquity (*awon*) and solemn as-  
 sembly,/ ... my soul hates;/... When you spread forth your  
 hands,/ I will hide my eyes from you;/ even though you  
 make many prayers,/ I will not listen;/ your hands are  
 full of blood/ 1:10-15.

The sin of the people is as great as that of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah! Yahweh in his discourse intended mainly for the ruling classes lists in great detail the multitude of their sacrifices that he is more than sated with. There is a progression in what Yahweh rejects, for the listing goes from external rites vv 11-13a, to the feasts and assemblies vv 13b-14, to prayer itself v 15. There is also an intensification in the expressions of rejection.

As in Amos 5:21-25; Hos 6:6; Isa 58:2-10 and many other prophetic passages, what Yahweh says can be summarized as: *I do not want cult, but rather interhuman justice*. Any other way of interpreting this message would be pure subterfuge. And the message is the same whether in the eighth century or in the seventh or in the post-exilic period. But here Isaiah goes further in rejecting prayer also. But why this dilemma between justice and cult? It is because while there is injustice among a people worship and prayer do not have Yahweh as their object even though we have the formal and sincere "intention" to do so. To know Yahweh is to do justice and compassion and righteousness to the needy. The question is not whether someone is seeking God or not, but whether he is seeking him where God himself said that he is<sup>6</sup>.

For Isaiah criticism of the cult is merely a continuation of social criticism. It is not an independent theme, as it is for the like-minded North Israelite prophets<sup>7</sup>. However, like Amos and Hosea, Isaiah is aware of a possible alternative: Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;/ remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;/ cease to do evil;/ learn to do good;/ seek justice (*mishpat*),/ reprove the oppressor;/ judge (*shapat*) the orphan,/ plead for the widow/ 1:16-17.

Here Isaiah could not be thinking of some ritual ablutions; they had rituals enough and their confidence in them

was a major part of the problem. The conversion demanded is to seek *mishpal*, to correct oppression and to render not merely legal justice but compassionate consideration for the most helpless members, the orphan and the widow. This is what the O. T. laws like Exod 22:21-24; 23:6-9; Deut 24:17;... required.

In the concluding vv 18-20, God is offering a choice and stating that forgiveness is possible. B) "... But if you refuse and rebel,/ you shall be devoured by the sword;/ ... " 1:20 It is in the same spirit that latter Isaiah denounces the cult in 29, 13f in the words made famous by Jesus in Matt 15:8-9 and Mark 7:6-7.

### 1.2.3 Divine sorrow - Israel does not know (*yada'*)

The first rebuke expresses God's sorrow more than his anger.

- A) Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;/ for the Lord has spoken:/ "Sons have I reared and brought up,/ but they have rebelled against me./ The ox knows its owner,/ and the ass its master's crib;/ but Israel does not know,/ my people does not understand."/ Ah, sinful nation,/..../ They have forsaken the Lord,/ they have despised the Holy One (*qadosh*) of Israel,/ they are utterly estranged./
- B) Why will you be smitten,/ that you continue to rebel?/.../ Your country lies desolate,/ your cities are burned with fire;/.... 1:2-9.

While describing the punishment more extensively in vv 5-9, the sin which the other two rebukes describe expressly in terms of injustice is here formulated as 'lack of knowledge of Yahweh' (v 3. See also 5:13; and positively expressed in 11:2.9). In Hosea, "to know Yahweh" becomes almost a technical term meaning: to have compassion for the needy and to do justice to them<sup>8</sup>.

### 1.3 The octopus of oppression

While agreeing fundamentally with Amos in his criticism of the social scene and the cult, Isaiah does not see the unconditional disaster in all-embracing terms as does Amos. There is no talk of deportation. The king is never touched on in ch. 1-5. Only the people below him come off badly<sup>9</sup>. Isaiah presents the tentacles of the octopus of oppression and in-



justice as enmeshing the various upper classes of society.

### 1.3.1 Anarchy unlimited

Isaiah sees the complete collapse of the internal political order in 3:2-5. He enumerates the *classes* which are going to be affected: generals, soldiers, judges, prophets (of the court and cult), soothsayers, elders (v 2). And *the people too* will oppress one another (v 5).

### 1.3.2 Corruption in high places

In 3:14-15, Yahweh enters into judgment with *the elders and the princes* of his people:

"It is you who have devoured the vineyard,/ the spoil of the poor (*anawim*) is in your houses./ What do you mean by crushing (*daka'*) my people,/ by grinding (*tahan*) the face of the poor?" says the Lord of hosts. 3:13-15

Unlike the princes who were from the upper classes, the elders who should have defended the poor have become their devourers. Dire indeed is the plight of the poor! Although the word 'spoil' (*gazal*) normally refers to stolen goods, here it may not be so much a case of robbery as of seizure through legal means. Very possibly the "institutionalized violence" of judicial corruption is involved. 'Crushing the people' and 'grinding the face of the poor' are stages when oppression becomes ruthless and reaches into the innermost 'being of the person resulting in dehumanization of the oppressed poor, whom Yahweh calls 'my people'<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.3.3 Wanton women of Zion

In words reminiscent of Amos' 'cows of Bashan' (Amos 4:1-3), Isaiah attacks the luxury-loving *women* of Jerusalem:

A) The Lord said:/ Because the daughters of Zion are haughty/...

B) The Lord will smite with a scab, the heads of the daughters of Zion,/ and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts./ .... In that day.... Instead of perfume there will be rotteness;/.... 3:16-4,1

In vv 18-23, we have the longest catalogue of feminine finery and frills in the O. T., which could leave even an Imelda

Marcos in the shade. For their haughtiness and seductive looks, their beauty will soon be put to shame. Their men will fall by the sword and they will be hard put to find a husband to take away their reproach. A similar warning is given to the women of Jerusalem in 32:9-14.

### 1.3.4 Seven woes

Combining 10:1-4 with 5:8-24 provides us a series of seven woes, the biblical number of fullness. There is good Justification and a fair consensus in favour of this shifting. The whole series may well be directed against more or less the same group, namely *the officials*. The series very aptly follows the parable of the vineyard in 5:1-7, which alludes to the breakdown of justice, with consequent oppression of the poorer classes<sup>11</sup>.

#### *Iniquitous lawmakers*

- A) Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,/ and the writers who keep writing oppression,/ to keep back from judgment the poor (*dallim*)/ to steal justice (*mishpat*) from the poor (*anawim*) of my people./ that widows may be their prey,/ that they may plunder the orphans!
- B) What will you do on the day of punishment,/..../ and where will you leave your wealth?/.... 10:1-4

Here it is not a question of injustice stemming from illegal activity but a matter of the ruling class enacting unjust laws which would enable them and their friends to seize the property of the poorer classes, who had little in the way of legal rights or representation to defend themselves. We must remember that Isaiah was from Jerusalem and might even have been a member of the aristocracy. He had inner knowledge of the ruling classes of Judaeon society.

*Latifundism*: We have already spoken of 5:8-10 above in section 1.1.

*The reeking rich*: The rich were accustomed to mock God (5:18f), were morally depraved (5:20), puffed up with pride (5:21) and used to engage in prolonged orgies of drunkenness (5:11f-22)<sup>12</sup>.

#### *Carousing and corrupt judges*

Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,/ and valiant

men in mixing strong drink,/ who justify the wicked for a bribe,/ and turn aside the righteousness of the righteous from him! 5:22f

In this seventh woe, the prophet condemns the judges not only for their intemperance but also for the taking of bribes, this time from the guilty to acquit him and to deprive the innocent of his right (cf. also 29: 21). It seems that Isaiah can never be tired of denouncing the corruption of judges and the denial of justice to the innocent and the poor, especially the most powerless in society.

#### *The flaming anger ('ap) of Yahveh*

Because of all these crimes by the various sections of the society, by which

"they have rejected the law (*torah*) of the Lord of hosts,/ and have despised the word (*imrah*) of the Holy One of Israel./ Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people,/ .../..." 5:24-25.

This prediction, 5:24-30, ends with a reference to the menace of the Assyrian invasion [A) 5:8-23, B) 5:24-30].

#### **1.4 Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?**

If the anger of God is kindled, then arises the question: 'Who among us can dwell with the devouring fire?' Isaiah answers: He who walks righteously (*tsedaqah*) and speaks uprightly,/ who despises the gain of oppressions,/ who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe,/ who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed/ and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil,/.... 33:13-16.

The response which resembles the "entrance liturgies" (Ps 15:1-5 and 24:3-6) but is not one, presents the type of man who will survive the ordeals of history and God's anger<sup>13</sup>. From the foregoing picture of the society presented by Isaiah, this type of man must indeed have been a 'rare species'!

#### **1.5 Human pride (*gabhut*), the Root of Evil**

In these early chapters, Isaiah enquires about the *anthropological presuppositions* of these conditions of intolerable injustice. Since pre-exilic religion knew of neither devil nor demons, the question of the origin of so much evil in history



becomes acute. God reveals to Isaiah that man's pride and haughtiness is the root of all evil. This is impressively described in the splendid poem about the fate of the vainglorious in 2:6-22:

The haughty looks of man shall be brought low,/ and the pride of men shall be humbled;/ and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day./ For the Lord of hosts has a day/ against all that is proud and lofty,/ . . . 2:11-12. .

*A day for Yahweh: (yom 1<sup>e</sup> yahweh)*

What Amos calls the 'Day of Yahweh' becomes in Isaiah the 'Day for Yahweh' (22:5). What Amos and Hosea call a *visitation*, becomes in Isaiah a *theophany*. This theophany of Yahweh leads to a division among men and women: to the sudden end of the wicked but also to the blossoming of those faithful to the bond with Yahweh. This division means the establishment of a new world order, a *divine mishpat*. Here Yahweh intends to raise up mankind (din/shpt, Isa 3:13f; cf Ps 50:4-6; 96:13; 98:9). It is to be the victory of the divinely desired order of being which had existed once upon a time in the primordial era<sup>14</sup>.

## 1.6 Predictions of doom

After exposing the agents of oppression and their methods, as a warning for conversion, Isaiah threatens the people with a judgment of a catastrophic nature - a complete destruction (cf 1:7-8; 3:8; 5:24-25; 6:11-13; . . .). But Isaiah holds the wicked themselves responsible for the doom: "Woe to them! For they have brought evil upon themselves." (3:9b; cf 3:11)

### *Call to conversion*

The uttering of woes against the oppressors of the poor is followed by a call to conversion (cf 1:16 17; 18-20). And even the chastisement will be purificatory (cf 1:25; 4:4). Even the theme of hope contained in the doctrine of the Remnant (cf 4:3; 10:20-23) can be seen as an invitation to repent. "A remnant will return" (*shear yashub*) could be translated as "a remnant will repent" from the usual meaning of the Hebrew root *shub*<sup>15</sup>.

## 1.7 Isaian messianism and vision of the ideal, Eschatological society

In 9:2-7 and 11:1-9, Isaiah speaks of a future Israelite

king of salvation, who was later described by the (Aramaic) title 'Messiah', wherein he presents his vision of the ideal society. This 'Prince of Peace(*shalom*)' will sit upon the throne of David ... "and over his kingdom,/ to establish it and to uphold it/ with justice (*mishpat*) and with righteousness (*tsedaqah*)/ from this time forth and for evermore." 9:6-7

The shoot from the stump of Jesse on whom the spirit of the Lord shall rest

... shall not judge by what his eyes see,/ or decide by what his ears hear;/ but with righteousness (*tsedeq*) he shall judge (*shapat*) the poor (*dallim*),/ and decide with equity for the meek (*anawim*) of the earth;/ Righteousness (*tsedeq*) shall be the encircler of his thighs,/ and faithfulness (*emunah*) shall be the girdle of his loins 11:3-5.

The king's *tsedeq* will bring peace even to the wild beasts and his knowledge of Yahweh will overflow to his people (11:1-9). Even the less known third messianic prophecy (32:1-8) begins, Behold, a king will reign in righteousness (*tsedeq*)/ and princes will rule in justice (*mishpat*) 32:1.

### 1.8 Yahweh, God of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*)

According to Isaiah, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* are important attributes of Yahweh himself and it is he who will bestow them on Zion.

The Lord of hosts is exalted in justice,/ and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. 5:16 ... For the Lord is a God of justice;/ blessed are those who wait for him. 30:18 The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high;/ he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness. 33:5

### 1.9 Yahweh's justice (*mishpat*) and holiness (*qadosh*)

While Isaiah is one with the pre-exilic prophets in presenting Yahweh as one who has, is and seeks justice, Isaiah's uniqueness consists in presenting him as the 'Holy One of Israel'. (1:1; 5:19-24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30:11-12-15; 37:23) This consciousness of the holiness of Yahweh and his own sinfulness and that of his people, had been indelibly marked on him in the great vision which he had at the beginning of his

prophetic mission as described in ch. 6. The iniquity ('*awon*) and sin (*hattal*) taken away by a seraph with a burning coal (6:7) link up with the sin and iniquity of the people in 1:4<sup>16</sup>. It is to the credit of Isaiah to have seen the social evils as offences against God's holiness. Any social sin is a desecration of God's holy name: ... "they have spurned the Holy One of Israel"(44)<sup>17</sup>. ... "and the Holy God is proven holy in righteousness" (5:16) (cf 4:3-4).

### 1.10 Primacy of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*) in Isaiah

Justice and righteousness are such a decisive theme for Isaiah that he speaks of them as a pair at least 9 times (1:21-27; 5:7-16; 9:7; 28:17; 32:1-16; 33:5), of justice alone 21 times and of righteousness 17 times. In fact, this demand to do justice and righteousness especially to the weakest in society is only the firm covenant stipulation (cf Exod 22:20-26; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34; Deut 10:18-19; 24:17). The welfare and continuity of the society and the nation depend on the fidelity to the duty of executing *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*.

This obligation is so fundamental and sacred that in Isaiah's view (5:8-9; 10:1-4; ..) as in that of the other pre-exilic prophets too, very specific abuses of social justice lead to the destruction of the Israelite society in general. In the last analysis these are crimes which occur among all the peoples of the world in the most varied circumstances; and we always end up finding a *modus vivendi* with them without much squeamishness. Are not Isaiah, Amos and the other prophets assigning them too much importance when they see in them the cause of the great approaching disaster?

Albrecht Alt derives the social critique from an idea of the appropriate and right *constitution of the people of Yahweh and of their unity*<sup>18</sup>.

José Porfirio Miranda finds the reason for this prophetic rejection of Israel on the basis of social crimes in the fact that Israel had frustrated the only reason for its election, viz. to teach "justice and righteousness" for all humankind (Gen 18:19). Isaiah explicitly spells out why Yahweh will lay waste his selected vineyard, "the house of Israel": because he expected *mishpat* but found *mispah* (murder); he had expected *tsedaqah*



but found only *tse'aqah* (a cry of distress) (5:7). Because Israel totally failed Yahweh, the oppressed of this whole earth continue to "cry out" (*tse'aqah*) in vain<sup>19</sup>.

### 1.11 Brief reflections

Our society today, both international and national, secular and ecclesial, is not very different from that of Isaiah. If not gloomier. The institutionalized exploitation of the developing nations by the developed nations, the corruption, bribery and oppression rampant in our country with the consequent denial of justice to the economically and socially oppressed classes is "the outcry" (*tse'aqah*) that the Lord hears when he looks for "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*) and the blood of the innocent victims of injustice based on caste, colour, creed, sex, economics, etc., and the blood of those who dare to stand up and fight with and for these victims is "the blood" (*misphah*) that the Lord finds when he looks for justice (*mishpat*).

The Church, the new Israel, mainly the western Church caught up in the economics of the developed nations, has domesticated the message of the Bible, of the prophets and of Christ, calling as 'almsgiving' what the Bible calls 'doing justice', at least from the sixth century A. D. "The Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation', 1984" and "The Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation 1986" from the Vatican are a belated and grudging response to the problem of oppression when challenged by the movement of the Theology of Liberation especially from Latin America.

The Indian Church, too, concerned for and with its vast institutional assets, especially the inflow of foreign funds, is often a 'mute' witness of the injustices in our society, when she is herself not committing them, e. g., in the matter of just wages to and human attitude, if not biblical attitude, towards the collaborators in our institutions, just to mention one example.

The Church at all levels, which includes each of us, needs to take the mission "to do justice and righteousness" seriously with all its implications, if we are to be faithful to our "election" by the Lord.

## II. Political Prophecy in Isaiah

### 2.1 Yahweh's work (*ma'ase*) – History and suprahistory

It is hoped that "the social critique" of Isaiah has been sufficiently established and that it is evident that the 'distortion' consists not in calling him a 'social critic' but in denying that he is one. However, it would be a distortion also to maintain that he was 'only a social critic'. In fact, he was for Israel what we might today call a 'political and foreign policy pundit'. This area requires another study. But even in a brief, sweeping historical survey to complete the picture of Isaiah, we see that in fact the major part of his efforts and prophecies were concerned with advising the kings of the day against foreign alliances either with the super-powers, Assyria or Egypt or with the smaller neighbouring nations, instead of trusting in Yahweh. (It was during the Syro-Ephraimite war of 734-732 BC that he delivered to Ahaz the famous 'sign of Immanu-El' prophecy in 7:3ff.) He constantly strove to exhort the king and the people to look beyond the momentary situation, not to let their 'heart (*lebab*) fear' (7:4), to 'believe (*aman*)' (7:9), to 'trust (*betah*)' not in chariots or earthly rulers but in the Holy One of Israel (31:1; 36:6-7) and in Yahweh's word (*dabar*) (31:2), to wait for the 'day for Yahweh' (22:5), to have a new concept of time, as 'at first (*rishona*)' (1:26) when Yahweh will bring about a new era of salvation (9:1ff), to recognize Yahweh's 'plan' (*'etsa*) (30:1) and Yahweh's work (*ma'ase*) (28:21) by which Yahweh will destroy Judah, Jerusalem and even Zion from whom a Remnant is promised, a destruction that will be carried out through human agents like Assyria, 'the rod of my anger' (10:5), which in its turn will be destroyed for its pride (10:12ff), to believe in the promise of a future – messianic ruler in chs 9:11 and 32. This view of Isaiah of history as the ongoing work (*ma'ase*) of Yahweh is termed by Klaus Koch as *suprahistory*, meaning a 'total' movement running through time, which includes – and also impels – not only the Israelite people but everything that exists between them and the underlying reality of God<sup>20</sup>. It is only the Isaian school which later looks forward to an eschatological period in which swords will be beaten into

ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks because war among nations is going to cease for ever (2:14).

This vision of politics and history could also be considered a part of the 'social critique' of Isaiah, in the wider sense of the term.

## 2.2 The world today: sword-into-ploughshare-economy of disarmament

Looking back at 1988 and the number of wars that have ended, the new situation of hope on our sub-continent with the promise of rapprochement with China and Pakistan, the declaration of a Palestinian State and the opening of talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization by the United States of America giving rise to hopes of a settlement of the Israel-Palestine problem (the land of the prophets and the Bible), the man behind most of the winds of change, Mikhail Gorbachev whose address to the United Nations on December 7, 1988, envisioning the end of the cold war confrontation of the super-powers including China in a "new world order" for the 21st century, with "his vision, both compelling and audacious, suffused with the romantic dream of a sword-into-ploughshare 'transition from the economy of armaments to an economy of disarmament'"<sup>21</sup>, his remark to the UN Secretary General earlier in the day, "God is on your side at the United Nations", soon rephrased as, "The objective trends of what is happening in history are on your side" (thus equating God and the objective trends of what is happening in history), the entry of Mother Teresa and her sisters into the Soviet Union in Armenia, and the prospects of a papal visit to the Soviet Union brightening up, we can begin to recognize Isaian 'supra-history of Yahweh's work' and faintly see on a new horizon the glimmer of a new dawn heralding "the latter days" of Isaiah 2:1-4, when

"Yahweh shall judge (*shapat*) between the nations,  
and shall decide for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more." 2:4

Thus the prophetic work of Isaiah which called for a

social and political restructuring (*perestroika*) of the society and nation of Judah, could be called, *a la* Gorbachev, 'Social and Political Perestroika in Proto-Isaiah'.

"Prophecy ceased; the prophets endure and can only be ignored at the risk of our own despair. It is for us to decide whether freedom is self-assertion or response to a demand; whether the ultimate situation is conflict or concern."<sup>22</sup>

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### Footnotes

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19. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, pp. 160-169.
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## Praying the Psalms as an Experience of Prophetic Solidarity

“Today, if you hear God’s voice, harden not your heart.” Ps 95:7-8

The Book of Psalms is a collection of inspired poems in which Israel’s response to her God-experience and life-experience is articulated in celebrative as well as lamentable words and moods with occasional wise reflections or diverse problems “with all the licences and all the formalities, hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry”<sup>1</sup>. Israel appears before Yahweh, her God, as the beneficiary of the promised land and kingdom in David. As noted by Von Rad, “when these saving acts happened to her, Israel did not keep silent: not only did she repeatedly take up her pen to recall these acts of Yahweh to her mind in historical documents, but also address Jahweh in a wholly personal way. She offered praise to him, and asked him questions, and complained to him about all her sufferings, for Yahweh had not chosen his people as a mere dumb object of his will in history, but for converse with him”<sup>2</sup>.

In the Psalms we have an uninhibited, spontaneous and honest pouring out of the heart of the being of Israel before God (cfr. 1 Sam 1:15; Ps 42:4; 61:8; 145:7). The psalmists burst out in joy and praise and thank the Lord remembering his goodness and benevolence. They also lay before him all their doubts, anxieties and sufferings without reserve and without pretending to be pious and unmoved, but with all the sharpness that is in their being and life. “The psalmists are not trying to be pious or edifying. They use no verbiage, no insincere formalities. They are completely themselves: men possessed by a supreme faith in God, and with a penetrating awareness of what it means for human beings to stand before him. They give voice to fundamental human reactions in the presence of the Mystery,

of the Other who is so close to us yet so infinitely remote, so awe-inspiring yet so loving"<sup>3</sup>. They open themselves with all the contradicting sentiments of bitterness and joy, 'vengeance' and thanksgiving; they are bold enough to pin-point even to the moments when God did not seem to do justice to them or the poor as individuals (Ps 55) or as a community (Ps 44:79), even though they belonged to him through the covenant<sup>4</sup>. This covenant established a communion and solidarity between God and his people as also among the people. Israel had to be ever reminded of this fact of their existence through the prophets and through the liturgy they celebrated and the psalms played an important role in this important matter.

In this short article we shall see first how the psalms, especially the so called prophetic psalms and the psalms of lamentation, reflecting and resisting the dark and sorrowful aspects of life, become an authentic challenge to our humanity and sense of justice. With the psalmists we may undergo a process of release-therapy in which there is no hypocritical covering-up of what we really are and what we really feel. Secondly we shall see how these psalms can and should help us to be freed from some of our own suppressed and inhibited emotions and enable and embolden us to pull down some of the oppressive and unjust structures which we have created for ourselves and others, or others have created and thrust upon us and are perpetuated even in the name of God and religion. Much of our genuine experience of God and life is kept apart from prayer and is "left untapped and inarticulate and therefore not liberated"<sup>5</sup>.

### Prophetic psalms and social justice

In I Chronicles 25:1 we read that "David and the chief of the service also set apart certain of the sons of Asaph and of Heman and of Jeduthan, who should prophesy with lyres, with harpes and with symbols". We are told that there were people who uttered prophetic threats against social injustice and empty religious practices and this is actually reflected in Pss 11, 50, 81, and 95, 7a 11.<sup>6</sup> In Israel worship extended to and touched every aspect of human life as it should be and was not restricted to a few hours and places as it could be in a superficial life. True worship is prolonged

to the whole life impregnating it even in its details. Worship was, in fact, an occasion also to hear what the Lord had to say to his people: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak" (Ps 85:8). Word and instruction given in some of the psalms show prophetic style combined with ideas characteristic of them.

#### i. Ignoring the just God

Some lead a life of practical atheism which is the result of a culpable ignorance which again is caused by what the Bible calls *nabal* or foolishness. It leads to the corruption of family and society as explained in Ps 14:53<sup>7</sup>. This foolishness is characterised by the absence of *esah* counsel that should lead one to prudent decisions in matters concerning familial and political life (cf. Is 5:9; 28,29; Ps 16:7; 32:8; 33:11). Folly and counsel can have far-reaching consequences on human life in the family as well as in the society. According to Ps 14 and its twin 53 the philosophy of the evil doer is that there is no God to see and judge things; it is a practical atheism ignoring the ways of God, it is an alibi for evading one's religious and social responsibility and is a cover-up for "eating up the people". Isaiah describes a situation in which "wickedness burned like a fire... they snatch on the right, but are still hungry, and they devour on the left and are not satisfied" (9:18-20).

Some in leadership and authority exploited the poor and the weak for selfish gains as if there did not exist a God who saw and judged everything justly. This ungodly way of living and forgetting the reality of the existence of God is a terrible folly that leads to disintegration and destruction.

#### ii. Winning God with offerings and sacrifices

In Psalm 51 there is a theophany in which God is presented as judge. Here is a God who is not duped by empty words or hollow sacrifices. Genuine offering is to be accompanied by testimony of praising God (vv. 14, 23) which means accepting God in mind and heart as the Supreme and being obedient to his will as manifested in the commandments he has given (v. 16ff.) with all their personal and social consequences. One is not to join the thieves or wound or disrepute others with the tongue (vv. 18-20). God may appear silent

and inactive, but he is God and not man and with him execution of justice is inevitable, though with mercy. One who worships God in truth cannot be a thief or a liar; one who praises God with his tongue cannot slander or deceive with his tongue; none who has enjoyed communion with God can relish the company of thieves and adulterers.

Psalms 50 carries on the ideas of Amos (5:21-22), Isaiah (1:2-20), and Micah (6:1-8). It opens itself with the solemn atmosphere of a law-suit in which heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses (cf. Dt. 32:1; 1s 1:2; Mic 6:1-2). This cosmic setting shows the universal consequences and repercussions of human action whether well or ill done. The whole universe bears witness to what the wicked have done and are appealing to God for justice. The question of God to the wicked is to the point: "What right have you to recite my statutes? or take my covenant on your lips?"

Here again the question is one of exploiting others in the name of God and religion. People are conscious of their rights and privileges, while they conveniently forget the corresponding obligations. Those who do not care to live according to the statutes of the Lord have no right to proclaim them; only those who live in communion with God and his brothers and sisters have a right to appeal to the covenant.

Every worshipping service at which the covenant is renewed is high time for Israel; above all, it is a "Today" when they have to rededicate themselves to God's covenant and the co-covenant partners. The God whom they worship is not a mere spectator but one actively watching over and guiding the world. Every "today" is a gift of God to live the covenant in its fulness.

Thus the prophetic psalms remind Israel of its commitment to God and humanity with its vertical and horizontal dimensions especially in the context of worship when they open themselves to their God and saviour. Their faithfulness can uphold and sustain the cosmic order and beauty as their wickedness can disturb and destroy it. Of course, it is the Lord who is master of the world and he sees to its order. But man who is the crown of creation and for whom God created everything has to choose freely the order willed by God.



## 2. Psalms of justice

Not many of us experience life as a beautiful orchestra with the blending of different voices: in reality, for many it is a mixture of contradicting experiences all of which have a role to play in moulding the human person. This multi-dimensional experience of life with all its complications becomes all the more heavy in the negative aspects of life as alienation, enmity, persecution and death. As a reflection of normal life, the psalms contain a number of individual and community laments in which, though with a note of hope, these negative aspects of life are brought before God.

Among the psalms of lamentation some are generally known as 'imprecatory psalms' or even 'cursing psalms', as there appear invocations of judgment or calamity or curse pronounced against the enemies of God or those who are enemies of the people of God. Such imprecations occur also in the other books of the O. T. as from the lips of Moses (Judg 5:31), of Jeremiah (11:20; 15:15) and others. In the Book of Psalms we have a few which are evidently in this category, as 7; 35; 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; 137 and 139.

### i. Imprecatory psalms or psalms of justice?

Some expressions in the above mentioned psalms appear strange and shocking to us as we read in Ps 69:22-25:

Let their table before them become a snare,  
and when they are in peace, let it become a trap.  
Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not;  
And make their loins continually shake.  
Pour out thy indignation upon them,  
And let the fierceness of thy anger overtake them.  
Let none dwell in their tent.

These lines seem to come from the burning heart of one overwhelmed by the blind fury of feelings of vindictiveness which he is hurling against his enemies. The urge for vengeance here is too obvious to be ignored. We see the same in other psalms also and so deserves our special attention and consideration. The psalmists pour out their hearts before the Lord in prayer. Before the majesty of God how could they dare to pray in such a manner? Has not the O. T. forbidden all such vengeance? 'You shall not bear grudge against the children

of your people; but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' This injunction which was restricted to the Israelites alone was again extended even to the enemies. "If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him to lift it up." (Ex 23:4-5; cfr. Prov 25:21-22)

It is difficult to see the above psalms as expressions of vengeance and we would rather call them psalms of justice, cries for order, equity and justice in human life and personal relations on this earth. Yahweh is a God of justice and mercy at the same time; he wants his people also to be just and righteous in their dealings with one another. The psalms know only an inner-worldly *shalom*, peace, prosperity and bliss: "For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in sheol who can give thee praise?" (Ps 6:5) Hence justice has to be done in this life on the earth. This is the cry we hear in the psalms of justice in a language which was sincere, authentic and intelligible to the people who uttered them.

## ii. Covenant solidarity

Israel's relation to God and to one another is historically based on the covenant. Yahweh is their God and they are his people. They form a family. Their relationship is governed by a sense of proportion rather than by the *lex talionis* (Ex 21-23ff.). In a society which was so closely knit and saw each other as kinsmen, had to protect and defend itself through the institution of the *goel ha dam*, 'the redeemer/ avenger of blood.' Its purpose was to avoid bloodshed and protect people. But the O. T. insisted that it should not exceed limits. In the psalms there is no question of man punishing the culprits or evil doers, it is an appeal to Yahweh to do justice. Forgiving is divine but demanding justice is human and the latter is what we see in the psalms of justice.

The evil doers or the enemies of the people of God are not identified and we are not concerned about such questions here. The psalmists see wickedness and evil and they bring it, as it were, to the attention of their God so that they may have peace of conscience and may be liberated from those who live and act unjustly.

## iii. False accusation

Just and honest life of certain individuals may be a threat to those who lead a licentious life at the expense of others. In Psalm 7 we hear someone unjustly accused, opening his heart to the Lord. Justice violated or denied to anyone will have its consequences on society. The one accused proclaims his innocence before the Lord and prays that he if guilty of crime be trampled into the ground leaving his soul in the dust (v. 5). He prays that mischief be returned to the wicked and violence descend on his own head (v. 16) so that God may establish the righteous (v. 9). The Lord has to judge and sustain justice.

## iv. God dishonoured in his people

The attitude of an O. T. believer with regard to the enemies of his people is well expressed in Psalm 139:21-22:

Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord?

And do I not hate them that rise up against thee?

I hate them with perfect hatred;

I count them my enemies.

With all its infidelities and sins Israel belongs to Yahweh and any crime done against his people is a crime against Yahweh himself. Psalm 79 is a sharp expression of this fact presented in a lamentation. Heathens enter into the Lord's inheritance, defile its temple, kill them and give their bodies to be eaten by beasts. Nobody helped them, the neighbours only made fun of them. They even asked where Yahweh their God was gone. Why should one community destroy another one? God is to punish the wicked so that justice may be done in the community of nations.

## v. Let cursing be turned back

In Israel the spoken word "is never an empty sound but an operative reality whose action cannot be hindered once it has been pronounced"<sup>18</sup>. There are words which merely convey ideas about a reality and there are words which have the power to convey a reality. The latter is seen especially in the blessings and curses. Evidently the word of God is powerful and creative as spoken by God directly or through his prophets (Is 54:10-11). We have to remember that for Israel *dābār* meant both 'word' and 'thing'<sup>19</sup>. Even the human word is

powerful and effective; this conviction is implied in Psalm 109 in which a poor man is supposed to have suffered through the magically effective words of the wicked (v.17ff.). To get out of the evil consequences of the curse, the worshipper returns the same to the source which is the only way to escape it (vv.20-27). God alone can do this and so he appeals to God. The wicked enemies who pronounced evil words against the innocent individuals and communities will have to take the consequences.

In Israel individual and corporate life is seen in covenant solidarity and any evil or injustice has its social or even cosmic repercussions. All that the psalmists do in their cry for justice is to pray to God to reestablish order and peace. About these psalms C. S. Lewis wrote: 'I found that these maledictions were in one way extremely interesting. For here one saw a feeling we all know only too well, resentment, expressing itself with perfect freedom, without disguise, without self-consciousness, without shame as few but children would express today.'<sup>10</sup> When we compare the language used to describe the sufferings of the just, we understand well that a proportionate language is used in demanding justice and fairness. Lewis again notes that "the higher the stakes, the greater the temptation to lose your temper over the game"<sup>11</sup>. The psalmists felt an acute sense of justice and they expressed it before their God. To God one can say anything and everything, God will correct him if needed. "... We should respect the emotional heat which calls forth such protest and see it as a witness to the intensity of the struggle against evil and oppression and dehumanization which all too often become for us too familiar for more than passing interest."<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Psalmic prophecy in India today

The Israel of old did not hesitate to lay before their God an integral picture of their life as they appeared before their God. For them opening the heart before God meant opening it completely and without reserve, whether it pleased or did not please God. They even dared to accuse God when they felt that he was keeping away from them as is clear in Psalm 8.

O Lord God of hosts,

how long will you be angry with your people's prayers ?



You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
You do make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
and our enemies laugh among themselves. (vv. 4-6)

As already noted earlier our prayer remains partial and hypocritical; we do not take into account the full reality of our lives when facing God even privately, it seems. In this part we shall make a modest attempt to present some possibilities especially in the socio-religious context of India.

The unjust structures of religion and society

Whatever religious or sociological interpretations one may give to casteism in India, modern India is trying to liberate itself from a traditional idea which was perhaps conceived as a basis for a smooth running of society through specialised labours which might have got theologised and accepted in the name of God and religion. Whatever that be, millions of people in India have been discriminated and humiliated for the vested interests of a few. We are in a terrible world where one's worth is determined by birth.

The best way we can help the caste-ridden is to identify ourselves with them. In a speech at the Suppressed Class Conference in Ahmedbad Gandhiji declared: "I was at Nellore on the 6th of April. I met 'untouchables' there and I prayed that day, as I have done today, that if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition... I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism."<sup>13</sup>

Kumāranāśan, a great poet of Kerala, wrote in his *Candālabhikṣuki* (1922): "For fools a folly of yesterday becomes the practice of today and a dogma of tomorrow." The same author wrote in the same book that "a Pulayan is not a weed that grows beside the paddy"<sup>14</sup>. But even years after him the situation remains the same, as noted by A. S. Rajan<sup>15</sup>:

Mahatmas have come.  
Mahatmas have gone.  
But the sufferings have not gone.  
The sufferings won't go

Until the exploited are aware and rise  
To break the shackle and the bondage.

### A Harijan Psalm

Lord God, why did you create me a Harijan?  
Is it true that in previous *Janma*<sup>16</sup> I was a Brahmin  
who persecuted the poor and the ignorant?  
Lord, who will save me from this *samsara*?<sup>17</sup>

Yet Lord, you created me too!  
A Harijan, yet I belong to you  
Humiliated and exploited that I am.

May my persecutors be reborn Harijans?  
But no, Lord, let none be born a Harijan!

The harijans have to become conscious of their dignity as human beings, of their equality with other men. Let them be convinced that they are no less human than anybody else. Education, riches, may be the way to their liberation. The humanity that is being humiliated in the persons of millions in India are awakening; that cannot be stopped by any power on earth. Harijans are not beasts of burden for the rich land-owners. Let the oppressors be freed from their fool's paradise, let them see the human and the divine in every man and woman as taught by the rishis.

### i. Oppression by the powerful

There has ever been oppression of the poor and the weak by the rich and the powerful. The latter forget that they are building on the sweat and blood of the former. They forget that their selfishness ruins the nation. Corruption is the cancer of Indian society. People forget that honest business alone brings prosperity. The political and economic manipulations are eating away all that is being built up on the one side. Even honest and sincere politicians are being marketed away with the force of money or threatened by power.

The prophets of Israel spoke against those who sold human beings for a pair of sandals; they spoke of the false balances used in business. Lord they are eating up your people. Yes, they are unaware that they are eating fire!

## ii. Religious discrimination

People quarrel in the name of God who is the Father of all and who wills only the good of his children. Why can't religions exist side by side and work for human and national integration? The humanity we share is deeper than our religious commitments and that will foster understanding and solidarity among us.

Universality or catholicity in its roots is particularity and individuality; it is unity in diversity. This kind of unity is possible and is a must in a society like that of India. Unfortunately, even those who preach such universality seem to advocate a uniform monolithic society, saying diversity is the cause of all rivalries. This attitude is seen in divergent religions, nay even in the same religion with different traditions. The Catholic church in India is a communion of three individual churches with the same faith though with differences in the expression and living of that same faith. Even against the explicit theological principles and teaching of the universal church, some try to discriminate and segregate churches in the name of uniformity. This is, in fact, a kind of ecclesial apartheid.

## 4. Religious multinationals and exploitation

Churches that segregate sister churches are not often shy of stealing personnel from those churches which are seen as a necessary evil; hundreds of candidates are thus being recruited as if the whole of India and the world belonged to them! The question of candidates being sent to Europe, especially to Italy, was once debated even in the Indian Parliament and press reports continue, though everything is being covered up in the name of God and religion. European congregations are recruiting personnel from Africa, India and the Philippines to take care of their institutions which are numerous, but with hardly any one to look after them.

Cases of nuns being discriminated in the name of nationality and ecclesial traditions are known to this writer. Should not those who enter religious life from a third world country have the same rights as the Europeans? That was but a dream of the candidates and their parents. Perhaps it had appeared to them that *Sanyasopi videsheshu varam*, 'even reli-

gious life is better in Europe'. Some of the recruiters insist that these should be denied even their ecclesial identity in the name of a false and deceiving uniformity though they are in their own country and among their people. They ignore the teachings of Vatican II and preach a monolithic uniformity.

The following is a psalm by an Italian nun in Rome:

By the waters of Tiber in a convent I abide  
 day-full of labour and night-full of lament my comrade.  
 I dreamt a land of grace and peace ahead  
 yet in life humiliation and bitterness reign.

I remember the land of *Rakuli*<sup>18</sup> and *Onam*<sup>19</sup>  
 All have gone and I feel lonely ever more.

Institutions and money are in plenty  
 No nuns to supervise and count the income.  
 In the poverty of my land there were riches  
 In richness here is frustration

Lord, I curse that day I decided to go abroad  
 Yet, forgive, I'll continue, bear with me today!

## Conclusion

The Book of Psalms is well described as a school of prayer where one learns to pray with the whole being without any reservations and pretensions. Our prayer has to be inspired by life and its problems and it has to be also life-transforming. Christians speak of social injustice everywhere. Let them turn back to themselves and put their own house in order. Let us be liberated first to be able to liberate others. The God of the Bible identifies himself with his people; in them he rejoices and suffers. The people also are conscious of their solidarity with God and with the whole of humanity. Hence the psalms become an experience of prophetic solidarity especially with the neglected and persecuted and marginalised.

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## Footnotes

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6. S Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Oxford, 1982, p.56ff; C. Stuhlmueeller, *Psalms I*, Wilmington, Delaware, 1983, p. 95.
7. Cf. Also Proverbs 30:21-23; Is 9:15-17; Jer 17, 11.
8. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, London, 1958, p. 127.
9. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford, 1961, p. 107ff.
10. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 25.
11. Ibid., p. 29.
12. P. R. Ackroyd, *Doors of Perception. A Guide to Understanding the Psalms*, London, 1978, p. 85.
13. *Young India*, 4 May 1921
14. "Nellinchottil mulakum verum pullalla pulayan"
15. Quoted by V. T. Rajashekar in *Dalit Movement in Karnataka*, Madras, 1978, p, 13.
16. Janma - birth
17. Samsara - circle of births
18. Rakuli - a Christian feast commemorating the visit of the Magi to the Infant Jeaus.
19. Onam - a harvest festival of South India.

# The Minor Prophets as Conscientizers

Conscientization is an ambivalent if not ambiguous term. Applied to the mission of the Biblical prophets it would mean making the oppressors aware of their injustice towards the helpless and awakening in them a sense of covenantal duty towards their victims who in fact are fellow-Jews. In Marxist circles it is rather making the oppressed aware of their basic human rights and awakening in them a sense of class struggle, of revolt against the intolerably unjust structure.

But such a clear-cut distinction is much too schematized: the Marxist too dream of universal brotherhood, while the prophets often threatened with violent punishment. Let us therefore take a closer look at the message of the minor prophets and clarify their role and method.

## **Amos' blunt indictment**

The man of Tekoa was a *noqed*, a cattle breeder rather than a shepherd, rustic but rather well-to-do. He was a hard working farmer with an inborn sense of fairness: one reaps what one sows! He knew what was going on in his world, not only on the Judean plateau but also in Bethel and Samaria and was well informed about the atrocities perpetrated by the surrounding nations.

The divine call came as suddenly as the encounter with a wild animal: the Lord roars from Zion (1:2). When the lion roars who will not fear? When the Lord God has spoken who will not prophecy! (3:8).

He is shown visions of destruction: an invasion of locusts after the king's mowing, i. e., after the first crop levied as tax for the royal stables, destroying the only harvest which the farmer can keep; a fire increasing into an all-consuming conflagration (7:1-6). The seer pleads for mercy, such punishments would mean annihilation. The Lord relents.

New visions show that the degeneration of social and religious behaviour has gone beyond all bounds: a plumbline against a bulging wall demonstrates the inevitable collapse (7:7f); a basket of ripe fruit, *qayitz*, spontaneously evokes the idea of the end, *qetz* (8:1-3). The punishment is unavoidable: the roof of the sanctuary is already caving in, the pillars are tottering... there is no escape even in the remotest corner of the underworld, on the highest mountain peak or the deepest bottom of the ocean (9:1-3). They are warned: the day of visitation, the day of the Lord, will not be a day of victory, but one of mourning, as dark as the shadow of death! (5:18-20 cfr. Zephaniah 1:15f) Only a few faithful ones will be rescued, a precious remnant. Amos uses an apt comparison from village life: a hireling cannot simply state that a lion has eaten one of the sheep entrusted to his care, he could have sold it! He must snatch a tip of an ear or a part of a leg from the lion's mouth and so prove his statement. So too, Samaria will be destroyed. Only the leg of a sofa or part of a bed will be left while her people will be carried away and devoured except for a few faithful survivors, a precious remnant (3:12).

A more caustic warning is addressed to the ladies of the high society: 'Hear, you sleek cows of Bashan who incite your husbands to injustice, they will drag you out of your comfort, putting a hook or a ring in your nose, pricking a prong in your posterior and leading you through the breach of the city wall, dragging you past Hermon towards Assyria or (as in the NEB version) pitching you on a dunghill! (4:1-3)

The accusations are directed to all those who exploit or oppress the marginal people: judges who accept bribes to condemn (sell) the innocent; money lenders who start by giving a trifling loan, just enough to buy a pair of sandals, and end up making their clients lifelong bonded labourers; well-to-do people who drive the destitute to commit crime, a master and his son who both force the same slave girl to gratify their impure desire; temple officials who take a blanket or a bedding in pledge and instead of returning it at night-fall as the law requires (Ex 22:26; Dt 25:12), use it for sacred prostitution... women... and wine that has been taken as fine (2:6-8); mer-

chants who grudge the Lord the day of obligation on which they have to close their business, who use false weights and measures and mix pebbles to increase the weight of the grain they sell (8:4-6).

Amos does not refer so much to the beggar and destitute, the *ebyon*, as to the weak and vulnerable with meagre resources, the *dallim* who are taxed and cheated and have to bribe to survive (5:11).

The social and political structures have been vitiated, justice has been poisoned, turned into wormwood (5:6, 6:12), leaving such bitter taste in the mouth that one is urged to spit it out, being as sour as the grapes of Isaiah's vineyard: *sedaqah* (justice) has become *tsegaqah*, a cry of despair (Is 5:7).

The rich class are a bunch of parasites, feathering their own nests and basking in luxury (3:15, 6:4-6).

But the terms of indictment which the prophet uses have a deeper connotation. *Pesha'* which occurs 10 times (also 5 times in Micah), does not only mean transgression, an action against a law, but implies rebellion, revolt against the legitimate authority. (Cfr. Jeroboam against the house of David I Kg 12:19 or Edom against Judea II Kg 8:20). It means rejection of the constitutional order of justice (*mispat*) and righteousness (*sedaqah*)

*Mispat* refers more to individual cases of right judgment while *sedaqah* is related to the whole moral order, but both have a religious, if not cultic, connotation.

There was no division between the profane and the sacred in Israel; the world order was a gift of God. The tribe of Gad, the first to settle in its apportioned inheritance, received Yahweh's *sedaqah* and *mispat* at the same time as its territory (Dt 33:21). And a Davidic king was appointed by Yahweh to be a mediator of his love, executing his justice and righteousness, *mispat* and *sedaqah* (I Kg 10:9).

Some scholars try to trace the origin of these twin concepts to the Canaanite deities *Sedeq* and *Mitzor*, who foster a certain consciousness of solidarity, embracing the gods, the humans and the whole of nature. Through various rituals one has to foster this sense of faithfulness among gods and men.



Hosea might have assimilated this idea in his exhortation to seek the Lord: Sow *sedaqah*, plough it under in your furrows and you will reap a harvest of harmonious living and steadfast love, *hesed* (Hos 10:12). But Amos seems to be more antagonistic to such syncretism. He condemns the worship of Gilgal, Bethel, Samaria, Dan and Beersheba. *Gilgal galoh yig'leh...* Gilgal will certainly go into exile (5:5), evokes a certain assonance with *golah*, stripped naked. The Syrian goddess Ashimah is called *ashmah*, i.e., guilt of Samaria while the way, *derek*, of Beersheba should rather read *dedek*, i.e., the forceful one of Beersheba, a deity of the patriarch! (8:14) Bethel, House of God, shall come to naught, *I'awen* or, as Hosea puts it, turn into *Beth-awen*, house of evil (Hos 4:15, 5:8, 10:5 and Am. 5:5), where men kiss calves! (Hos 13:2)

The indictment becomes a blasphemous mockery of their religious practice: Go to Bethel and transgress, to Gilgal and increase your rebellion. *pesha'* (4:4). It is not a question of open idolatry, a worship of foreign gods, but a more subtle form of syncretism, assimilating Canaanite elements in one's ritual and behaviour. Such things are simply not done in Israel: one does not use a field of boulders to hold a horse race, nor take oxen to plough a rock! (6:12... the RSV read *babbaqqar yam*, to plough the sea, instead of *baqarim* oxen.)

The Israelites have rejected the well-established order of *mispat* and *sedaqah* and boast of their own vain achievements: You rejoice in Lo-Debar, (a transjordanian town which sounds like 'no thing', i.e., without reason), because you acquired by yourselves Karnaim, i.e., two horns, referring to Damascus and Hamath (II Kg 14:28) but also symbolizing power and pride (6:13).

This self-complacency is still more dangerous when it is combined with a sham religious practice, a third kind of idolatry! The affluents' conscience has been so corroded that it lost all its sensitivity. They carry on their routine ritual and find nothing wrong with their biased behaviour. The prophet roars: The day of the Lord will come like an earthquake, shaking their false foundation (6:11). The Lord utterly dislikes their celebrations and solemn assemblies. He cannot stand the smell of their incense and burnt offerings, he cannot see

the sight of their prolific oblations, and cannot hear the noise of their melodious songs and musical performances. What the Lord is asking is justice and righteousness, this will bring true fertility and growth like timely rain and streams which irrigate the fields without ever drying up (5:21-24).

As long as they do not know and cherish *nekohah*, i. e., straightness, the right that is permanently established (3:10), they better stay away from the sanctuary, get reconciled with their fellow men and then return with their oblation (Mat. 5:23).

One of the striking features of the prophet's preaching is that he does not criticize the cult of Jerusalem. He blames the people of Zion who are complacent and overconfident (6:1), but does not attack or ridicule the temple as he does the sanctuaries of Gilgal, Bethel or Beersheba. In fact, the Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem (1:2) : true instruction can still be given there !

Amos conscientizes the exploiters and oppressors, pointing out 'transgressions' which upset the right covenantal relations between God and men and the moral order among humans. He reminds them of their duties and calls for a return to the previous straightness of established relationships. But he is not only preaching, he also threatens.

The day of 'visitation, inspection (*pequddah*), will not be a joyful event: the Lord will 'visit' (*paqad*) their transgressions and decree suitable punishments (3:14).

What is remarkable in the description of the threats is that the agent of chastisement is not explicitly named: an 'adversary' will surround, 'capture and plunder the land (3:11). The 'sword' that inflicts defeat and destruction is an anonymous foreign hand and ultimately wielded by the Lord himself (7:9 and 9:1 + 4 + 10). The land will tremble and be tossed by strong waves that remind of the Nile (8:8). The Lord will deliver up the city and its palace to unnamed plunderers (6:8). The squares and streets, the fields and vineyards will be strewn with slains (5:1 + 16f). Those who dwell in luxury will be dragged into exile towards Hamath and Damascus (4:3; 5:27; 6:7), but the end of the journey is not stated. Those

who remain in the land, from North to South, will suffer oppression (6:14).

Although no guilty person will escape the winnowing sieve, the Lord will not utterly destroy his people (9:8f). After pulling down the delapidated building, a full restoration of the kingdom of David will be possible. After weeding out the wild growth, a pure plantation will start with the promise of a bumper crop (9:14f). The pruning process is medicinal, not vindictive.

### **Hosea, the tender lover but not so tender contestant**

Hosea's message does not differ much from that of Amos. It is however characterized by the tragic experience of his marriage with the unfaithful Gomer. Rebellion (*pasha*) becomes a breach of faithfulness (*'emeth*), the covenant is seen as a relationship between man and wife, based on loving kindness (*hesed*) and idolatry is considered adultery.

Historically it seems probable that the prophet contracted a normal marriage with the daughter of Diblaim. There is no obvious symbolism in the names of either the woman or her father and she bore *him* the first child, the fruit of their love. The other children are not explicitly stated to be his: 'She bore a daughter... bore a second son' (1:6+8). Meanwhile she might have become a professional *qedeshah*, sacred prostitute belonging to a shrine of Ba'al. She had a tattooed mark on her forehead and amulets or a bag of aphrodisiac herbs hanging between her breasts (2:2b).

Hosea had threatened Gomer, perhaps even repudiated her, but could not forget her fully. It is probably at this juncture of misery and despair that the prophetic call came. The Lord made him realize how similar his relationship with his wife was to that of Yahweh himself with his people Israel. This unhappy marriage had a purpose in the Lord's plan ('Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry'! 1:2).

In spite of repeated defections and unheeded warnings, the Lord's *hesed* persisted. He urged the faithless people to return, 'allured them and spoke tenderly to them' (2:14). Hosea too should forgive Gomer and release her from her bond as professional *devadasi*: the 15 shekels of 3:2 are not a

new dowry, remarriage with the same officially divorced woman was not allowed (Dt 24:1-4 and Jer / 3:1), it was the price for the emancipation of a slave girl.

There is a further symbolism in the period of probation before a full reconciliation: for Gomer, no relation with other men or with Hosea himself; for Israel, no dealings with *pillars* (fertility gods) or *teraphim* (ancestors worship), nor legitimate sacrifices and liturgical vestments (*ephod*), because Israel will be away in exile and the temple raised to the ground till their return (3:3-5).

Although more refined than Amos and more familiar with the high circles of society, Hosea too stigmatizes the social aberrations of Israel: their excessive greed and dishonest amassing of wealth (7:1 and 12:7-8), princes grabbing land by unfair confiscation (5:10), boasting about building spacious palaces (8:14)... debauchery and immoderate drinking (4:11 and 7:5).

But all this is related to their infidelity, their lack of faithfulness and loving kindness (*emeth, hesed*) and of a deep experience of God (*da'ath Elohim*, an inner knowledge and familiarity with Yahweh). Instead, there is lying, swearing, killing, stealing, increasing adultery and murder following upon murder! (4:1-2)

The more numerous invectives are directed against the cultic degeneration, sham sacrifices and idolatry. Gilgal witnessed the first rebellion (9:15) when Saul disobeyed the Lord going ahead with his offering in spite of the order of Samuel (I Sam 13:12-14) or sparing the best cattle and the most attractive girls under pretext of a later sacrifice (I Sam 15-21f). The shrine remained a place of unacceptable syncretism, of stubbornness and iniquity, a sore in God's eye (Hos 4:15; 12:11).

The Lord does not take delight in sacrifice or sacrificial meals offered for self-satisfaction by the unjust (8:13). He desires steadfast love, not sham offerings, and true knowledge or intimacy with God rather than vain worship (6:6 cfr Amos 5:21ff).

To show his contempt for the cult of Bethel, where the full grown bull was originally the mount of the invisible



Yahweh 'who brought them out of Egypt' (I Kg 12:28) but had become itself a deity of strength and fertility, the prophet reduces the animal to a mere calf (8:5; 13:2) or even female heifers (10:5). Bethel itself, house of God, is changed into house of wickedness, Beth-awen! (1:15; 5:8; 10:5)

Israel has played the harlot, going after other 'lovers', using the Lord's gifts of grain, wine and oil for her orgies in honour of Ba'al (2:5+8). They consult a piece of wood and ask advice from a fetish! (4:12) They no longer 'know' the Lord (5:3-4).

Through these repeated betrayals and adultery Yahweh's relationship with Israel is stretched to breaking point. At times the tender lover is transformed into a furious and ferocious beast of prey. 'I will pounce on Ephraim like a lion, a young lion, snatching and rending and none will rescue! (5:14) ... Like a lurking leopard I'll jump on them, like a bear that tears open their breast! (13:7) Israel may seem as prosperous as Tyre (TOB version), but her sons are destined for prey, to be led to the slaughter (9:13). The prophet then changes the metaphor and asks the Lord to give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts (9:14) or more plainly, 'O death, bring out your plagues, She'ol, bring out your destruction!' (13:14-16. Paul rendered *ehiy* as 'where'? in I Cor 15:55. instead of 'bring out' as required by the Northern dialect and the context). The guilty shall fall by the sword, their little ones be dashed to pieces and pregnant women ripped open! (13:16)

Hosea accuses the leaders for failing in their duties: the priests and the prophets have no 'knowledge' of God and have forgotten the Law (1:1-6; 5:1), they are not better than robbers and murderers! (6:9)

In fact, the rulers of Samaria are not mentioned by name, except Jeroboam II (1:1). They are incompetent or usurpers not recognized by the Lord (8:4). Instead of giving right judgment they are a snare and a net to trap their own subjects (5:1).

They are deposed by the people or devour one another (7:7). The year 743 BC has known four kings: Jeroboam who 'slept with his fathers', i. e., died a natural death (II Kg 14:23), his son Zachariah was murdered by Shallum who in turn fell

the same year at the hand of Menahem (cfr Zach. 11:8). During the two centuries of the Northern kingdom there were nine bloody coups each time bringing a short-lived dynasty on the throne. A change of ruler, or even a change of structure, is by itself no solution to social corruption, unless there is an inner return to covenantal faithfulness!

The way Hosea announces the chastisement of Israel's infidelities has been a subject of controversy among commentators: Is it a just proportionate punishment or down-right retaliation?

There is no doubt that they must reap what they sow (8:7; 10:3), but the same simile is used in a positive way: 'sow *sedagah* and reap *emeth*! 'It is time to break up your fallow ground and seek the Lord, that He may come and bring a rain of salvation' (10:12).

Several passages bring out a remarkable correspondence between crime and punishment: Because your mother has played the harlot and gone after other lovers who supposedly give her bread, wool and oil, Yahweh will take back his wool and flax and uncover her nakedness, i. e., accuse and expose her publicly as adulteress, and put an end to her merry-making (2:5-13 *passim*). Because the priest has rejected knowledge and forgotten the Law, the Lord will reject him from being a priest and forget the children of Israel (4:6). Ephraim is like a silly dove without sense (*leb* = heart / mind), flying to and fro from Egypt to Assur; searching for vain military alliances, Yahweh will spread a net to trap them, bring them down and chastise them! (7:11-12) Because they have broken the covenant, set up princes not approved by the Lord, and worshipped idols, Yahweh will break the calf of Samaria to pieces, they shall cease anointing king and princes. They saw the wind, they will reap the whirlwind! (8:1-10) They trusted in chariots and warriors, and so Shalmaneser V destroyed them on the day of battle, mothers were dashed to pieces along with their children! (10:13-14)

This kind of corresponding 'retribution' is also found in Dt 32:21; Jer 21:14; 50:15. Obad. v. 15: 'As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your head!' Also Hab. 2:15-16: 'Woe to you who give your neighbours a flood of your

wrath to drink...drink you too and stagger, on you shall revert the cup from the Lord's right hand! (NAB)

Strictly speaking there is no real retaliation: no explicit juridical action is mentioned. The chastisement corresponds to the offence according to appropriate justice. Amos too emphasized that the Lord expected a greater faithfulness from his chosen ones, a greater sense of responsibility: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth, — you should have known better — therefore I'll punish you for all your iniquities!' (Am 3:2)

The purpose of judgment: is not retaliation, not even punishment, but a purification and reconciliation with the Lord of the covenant, a religious and social renewal!

There is a love relationship which can have its moments of high tension and threat: 'I'll drive them out of my house ... love them no more! All their rulers are rebels!' (9:15). 'They shall return to Egypt, the house of bondage!' (8:13; 9:3; 11:5)

But there is also passionate pleading: 'Return, adhere to loving kindness and justice (*hesed* and *mispat*), and wait continually on your God!' (12:6) There is endearing entreat: 'I will allure her, bring her to the desert where we had an honey-moon like relationship — I'll speak tenderly to her heart!' (2:14)

At times a certain helplessness comes to the fore: 'What shall I do with you... your love is so swiftly disappearing, like a cloud in the morning!' (6:4) 'But how can I give you up... how can I hand you over? My heart recoils within me... my compassion grows warm and tender' (11:8). 'I will heal their faithlessness, love them freely!' (14:4) 'How could I execute my fierce anger! I am God, not man! I shall not come to destroy!' (11:9) Love has the last word.

In a few passages Israel is considered a child rather than a lover: without God they are orphans! (14:3) The description of 11:1-4 is classic: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him. From the time of their stay in Egypt I called them my son! I was teaching them to walk, guided them with bonds of love and compassion... being like a mother who picks up her baby. (The RSV understood yoking against the jaw as re-

moving the burden of the 'yoke' which should be on the neck or on the shoulder but not on the cheek!) Then I fed them at the breasts.

This new symbolism of parental love (cfr also Is 49:15 and 66:13) can provide a certain rejoinder to those who take objection at the apparent prophetic discrimination against women: the husband is always faithful, the woman always adulterous! Here Yahweh is the mother and Israel is a male child. One must however concede that commentators should stress the fact that the Biblical message to married couples is faithfulness and readiness to forgive on both sides. Although God cannot be unfaithful, married men can and are as often as – if not more than – their partner.

As in the case of Amos, Hosea conscientizes and threatens the offenders. He exposes the hypocrisy of vain worship and castigates those guilty of social injustice. But his main concern is the betrayal by religious and political leaders, false syncretism and fertility cult at the local shrines and official sanctuaries and silly attempts at finding security in military strength and seeking alliances with the great powers. Salvation consists in a change of heart, a return to the loving God and faithfulness to his covenant.

### **Micah and Yahweh's controversy with his people**

With Micah we are back to the themes and vocabulary familiar to Amos. He too came from a small village, Moresheth in the lower hills of the Judean plateau. He addressed himself to both parts of the divided kingdom and Israel could refer to the whole territory. For him, the main source of evil was not just the palace and the temple, but the entire population of the big cities was responsible for social and religious deterioration: 'What is the transgression (*pesha*' = rebellion) of Jacob? Is it not Samaria! And the high places of Judah (*bamoth* = places of forbidden worship)? Are they not Jerusalem! (1:5)

The scandalous behaviour was not only in the sanctuary, but on the streets, the market places and private houses. At all levels there is corruption, greed, deceit. No loyal person or upright man (*hasid* or *yasar*) is left. They are after each



other's blood, hunt their brother with a net. One cannot trust a closest friend or even members of one's family, children and wife included! (2:2-6)

Nevertheless Hosea blames in a special way certain groups of people with responsibility.

The heads, the prince (*sar*) and the judge give judgment for a bribe (3:11; 7:13). The magistrates (*qazim*, military commanders?) do not know justice and pervert all iniquity. They behave like voracious wild animals who not only rip the skin of the poor and tear the flesh of their neighbours but even crush the bones to suck out the marrow. They are like butchers who hack their fellow men to pieces, treat them as meat for the cauldron! (3:1-3 + 9). The ruler of Israel (*shopet*) may be within a fortified city (literally a daughter of the garrison) which gives him a false sense of security. But they will strike him with a rod on the cheek (5:1).

The false prophets are ridiculed. They ask the true preachers not to rave (literally slaver, slobber = *nataph*): one should not slaver words such as 'Disgrace will not be taken away from us!' (2:6). If a man would walk with the wind (*ruah* = spirit/wind) and utter lies (*sheqer*) saying, I slaver words of wine and strong drink (*sheqar*), such is the kind of preacher this people deserve! (2:11)

The prophets lead the listener astray. They cry 'peace' when they get something to eat but declare war against those who do not feed them. Such deceivers will remain in darkness and disgrace! (3:5-7)

The priests as well as the prophets teach for money and give the people what they want to hear (3:11).

On his part, Micah is filled with the power and the spirit of Yahweh, he adheres to justice (*mispat*) and receives the courage to declare Israel's rebellion! (3:8 + 7:7)

The deceitful merchants and the rich exploiters are not spared either. God declares openly that He cannot forget the 'small measure', wicked scale and treacherous weights, the social pressure and false accusations (6:9-12).

More disastrous for society is the extortion of the landgrabbers and money lenders, scheming plans at night and executing them the next morning, because it is in their power to covet and grab fields and houses, oppress the lower middle class and drive them into bonded labour (2:2). Such people may join the army, risking their lives for the security of the rich but meanwhile the unscrupulous oppressors confiscate the inheritance of the slain and mortgage the field of the survivors (2:4-5). On their return these cannot even pawn their uniforms because they belong to the state! They lose their house, their wives are evicted and their children—their god-given pride—are lost for ever (2:8-9). In such circumstances not many will still volunteer to join the forces and, if at all, they will be too demoralized to stop the invader. It does not require a special divine inspiration to foresee the future defeat. Shalmaneser V had already deported Hosea, the last king of Samaria (724 BC), Sargon II will do the rest!

The prophet resorts to a symbolic action: Lamenting and wailing like a jackal because the cities will be plundered, he goes about stripped and naked as one destined for exile. The threatened destruction seems inevitable, the wound is incurable! (1:8-9)

Yahweh himself is affected and summons the universe to hear his accusation, a pathetic reproach: What have I not done for you? In what have I failed you? Remember all my previous redemptive actions, realize my salvific interventions (6:2-5).

The covenant was not a unilateral promise of blessings. It also contained the threat of punishment which serves as warning before the final curse. The Lord has already brought draught and failing crops, hunger and the sword. The land might be fully devastated and the inhabitants become a 'hissing', i.e., be jeered at by all the nations (6:13-16 + 3:12 cfr Dt 28:30-31 and Jer 26:31).

The remedy is not to be found in elaborated empty rituals... massacres of calves and rams... neither in the more demanding sacrifice of one's first born son, a forbidden practice taken over from the surrounding nations and to which even kings Ahaz (II Kg 16:3) and Manasseh (II Kg 2:16 also 17:17) resorted. What Yahweh wants is the justice advocated by Amos (*mispat*), the loving kindness preached by Hosea (*hesed*) and a

humble submission to the plan of the Lord (Mic 6:6-8; also Is 2:11 + 17 and 5:15).

Micah thinks with a certain nostalgia to the ancient way of life... closer to the nomadic pattern of the beginning of the dynasty, when the ruler (*moshel*) was more a charismatic leader, a pastor of Yahweh's flock, than a master and Lord (5:1-5 and 7:14).

Some redactor has inserted a vision of the peace and harmony of the eschatological kingdom, also found in Is 2:2-4: Zion will be exalted as the highest mountain, all nations will flow to it to hear the word of Yahweh and accept instruction how to walk in His ways. The traditional weapons, instruments of death, will be turned into agricultural tools to till the ground, produce food and sustain life. The symbol of peace is that every one will have his little vineyard and sit under his own fig tree! (1:1-4 cfr Zach 3:10 and also Nathanael's reaction to Jesus' allusion to the fig tree, in Jo 1:48). What a contrast between this messianic ideal and the behaviour of so-called pacific nations who mint money by selling weapons to the third world, for waging fratricidal wars!

Ultimately, God's steadfast love will be contagious: 'But who is like God (*mi-ca-el*) pardoning iniquity and taking delight in loving kindness, casting our wickednesses (*awono th*) to the bottom of the sea, remembering his faithfulness and loving kindness (*emeth-hesed*) as He promised to Abraham and Jacob in the days of old!' (7:18-20 cfr Lk 1-55)

Micah exposes the transgression of his people, warns them of the dire consequence of such ingratitude to the beneficent Yahweh, and challenges them to respond to His call to service in justice and love.

## Conclusion

One of the striking features of the three prominent prophets we have examined is that Yahweh occupies the central place in their lives and in their work. They were men of faith, called for a mission (Am 7:14-15; Hos 2:2; Mic 3:8 and 7:7).

When they expose the injustice of their time, it is not as mere social workers moved by some humanitarian motiva-

tion, but as men of God speaking in His name, expressing His very thoughts: 'Hear the word of the Lord !' (practically the whole of Hos 4:1-14:9). Yahweh identifies with the poor but through the prophets conscientizes the oppressors, censures their selfish dealings, threatens with proportionate punishment, invites and allures them to change their ways and return to the right covenantal relationships.

Central too — not only in Hosea but also in Micah and Amos — is the idea of religious aberration, a false sense of self-satisfaction induced by empty ritual practices, unrelated to the most reprehensible behaviour in every day life.

A. Maillot and A. Lelièvre rightly pointed out three types of idolatry rejected by the prophets (*Actualité de Michée* Labor & Fides, Genève 1976 pp. 9-10):

- 1) An obvious idolatry, i.e., worshipping as god something that is not divine whether it is Ba'al, the golden calf or any 'idol' ... a hero, an ideology, a certain value, even Mammon, the money god.
- 2) A more mixed idolatry in which Yahweh is still the Lord but where there is room besides for certain syncretism. Some elements of fertility cult, sacred prostitution etc. practiced by Canaan and allegedly more adapted to an agricultural civilization are added for good measure like the unknown god of Athens... in case Yahweh does not answer in some specialized field !
- 3) An idolatry of confusion, subtle and more dangerous. The sense of sin and injustice has been eroded. With the best of intentions man does what he thinks is the right thing but is blind for more serious shortcomings. He puts his trust in perverted practices and feel secure... men kiss calves or... murder in the name of religions !

The conscientization by the minor prophets is on a very different plane than that of Marxists but is certainly not irrelevant to our times.



# **Social Criticism as the Prophetic Role: a Biblical Prolegomenon**

"The Lion has roared. Who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken. Who can but prophesy?"

(Am 3:8)

000. The inner and irresistible force of the divine call drove a herder-farmer into Yahweh's unabated prophet of doom. The roar of the divine lion all the more terrifies the contemporary man. Listening to the misery and cry of the marginalized<sup>1</sup> (Is 5:7), the Lord once more has come down for liberation and recompense (Ex 3:7-8). "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (Is 6:8) He challenges modern Moseses, Isaiahs and Amoses, and eagerly waits for the Isaiahan response: "Here am I. Send me."

001. The term "prophetic" provides the dynamic and distinct articulation to the Biblical call. One is destined to portray the prophetic face and voice of God, which has to find its expression in the social criticism of the evil structures of the human society. The word "prophetic" needs clarification. Prophet is a person who by word or deed proclaims judgement whether condemnatory or salvific about the present day realities in the light of God's future, God being the norm, source and authority of this critical proclamation<sup>2</sup>. Not only the non-literary and literary prophets of the OT come under this classification. Every person of the old and new covenant communities is by call prophetic. God's people has to exhibit its fundamental thrust in its prophetic charism. And social criticism stands out as the protruding perspective of prophecy.

002. The emergence of sociological approach as the exegetical method of Scripture has made Bible more relevant for the modern man in his existential context<sup>3</sup>. This method

tries to situate the texts in their social milieu in which God-human encounter takes place. This makes possible for the Bible to speak to modern man in his flesh and blood context. The present study focuses on the sociological perspective of the Bible. A short preview of the Biblical theme of social criticism as the prophetic role is offered here.

1.00

## A. Roots of Social Criticism

God's creative, [historical and transtemporal acts, as recorded in the Bible, definitely illustrate his vision and programme for the cosmic beings.

### 1.1. a. Yahweh's vision in creation

The creative works manifest God's eternal power and divinity (Rom 1:20). The grandiose universe radiates Yahweh's goodness (Gen 1:31). God stands as the source ('from'), agency ("through") and goal ("for") of creation (Rom 11:36). Christ, the image of the invisible God enjoys the title of the first-born of all creatures; he is the origin, cause, *antaryamin*, finality and the sustaining force of the cosmic beings (Col 1:15-17). John uses *logos* imagery to express the same (Jn 1:1,3). Concerning man the Priestly tradition draws a sublime picture of him: he is created in God's own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). He is a blessed creature, crowned as the king of cosmos. Yahwistic tradition understands his call as the cultivator of the earth (Gen 2:5), 'ādām being wedded to 'ādama, soil (3:19; 2:7)<sup>4</sup>. This portrait of man reflects the socio-cultural context of the peasants of Palestine. Man is an earth-orientated being who owes his existence (3:19), sustenance (2:9), task (2:15; 2:5; 3:23; 4:2) and finality (3:19) to adamah. Earth serves for him as the temple of God, a medium for God/human realization (*Sakṣatkāra*). Priestly tradition refers to the subjugation of chaotic and divisive forces at creation. It presents a stable and orderly cosmos where every object, person, and activity has its meaningful place and its proper function<sup>5</sup>. There reigned a harmonious fellowship between God and the human, man and woman based on the principle of co-equality, human and animal, human and vegetation, human and soil. Adam and Eve, as concelebrants of creation, was to lead the cosmic orchestra in praise of the creator.

## 1.2. b. Cosmic design in re-creation

A new dimension to Yahweh's vision was given in the person of Noah and the cosmic covenant with him. This "blessed" being (Gen 9:1) symbolized a new creation. This new Adam was endowed with righteousness (*sadding*) and wholeness (*tamim*) (Gen 6:9; 7:1) as well as with vitality and authority (9:1-3, 6b-7) – the divine qualities which make him the image of God. As the one who found favour in the eyes of Yahweh (6:8) Noah was destined to enjoy the divine intimacy ("He walked with God", 9:1) – thus to integrate the Yahweh vision in his life (6:22; 7:5,9). In the person of Noah God was calling the new humanity to lead a harmonious and "restful" (Noah seems to mean rest) covenant life in fellowship with the entire cosmos. Yahweh's eternal covenant with sons of Adam reunited the entire cosmic family to grow together into the cosmic face and voice of the creator. Having done away with the chaotic divisions and bitter hostilities of the previous Adamic era, the new creation was put on the course of transformation into the divine image. Once more Adam enjoyed the fertile companionship with adamah (9:20). The new human could rejoin his creator in the festal and blissful divine rest, *samadhi* (2:2-3). There emerged the archetype of the celebrative man/woman who joyfully called on the name of the Lord in sacrificial praise (8:20; cf. Ps 116:12-14).

## 1.3. c. Covenant vision in the call

1.3.1. The blessing dynamics of God which forms the very life of the Triune God is humanized in the person of Abraham<sup>7</sup>. His call is defined in terms of blessing: to be filled with God's blessing which consists in allowing God to fill him with divine blessings, and to bestow the received blessings on other human beings (Gen 12:2-3). The Hebrew verb *brk* denotes the act of filling others with well-being, God being its source and finality. Humans may participate in this divine activity as God's agents. This epitomized God's vision for his images on earth. Abraham lived this call. It found its exquisite and climaxed realization in the person of the new Adam.<sup>2</sup> His total self-emptying (Phil 2:6-7) brought God totally into his life; God fully possessed him and filled him with his well-being. He in his turn imparted without restraint and reservation these bles-

sings to others. The "child of Abraham" (Mt 1:1) thus reflected God's perfect image (Heb 1:3) and assumed the title of child of God.

**1.3.2.** Presence of God stands as the supreme blessing for creation. Material blessings such as possessions, property, progeny and prosperity radiate this divine presence. These are the living signs of his loving presence in the life of human beings. God manifests himself through these mediums. Here sacred-profane, earth-heaven dichotomy is transcended. The spirit assumes the face of matter. Temporalities bear the hall-mark of celestial realities. The human is destined to enjoy the terrestrial blessings, and thereby to discover their "image"-face. These living symbols or flesh-and-blood mediums of the loving presence of God may serve him to enter into the divine milieu. Thus he can find his heaven on earth. The Kingdom comes into his life here and now. God's vision is being realized in his delectation of material welfare in fellowship with others, and this act puts him in the Kingdom of heaven. An authentic human being is being born here.

**1.3.3.** Abraham was called to appropriate God's vision for humanity. Yahweh promised him the blessings of progeny and property as well as the divine presence. But the call demanded a *kenosis* from the part of Abraham so that he may be filled with divine blessings. He has to reject his past life of security, self-complacency and comfort of religion and accept the life of a wanderer (Dt 26:5) — an outcast of society. Abram is to be grown into Abraham (Gen 17:5), one who fathers many nations by filling them with God's blessings and giving form to the generation of blessed beings. Covenant served as the medium of blessings. Yahweh concluded an eternal covenant with Abraham (Gen 15 and 17) by undertaking to realize the promised blessings of progeny, property and presence. Abraham had to appropriate the covenant reality by bearing on his body the sign of covenant. Further, he was obliged to "walk in God's presence and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). The former clause demanded an ever active life, always on motion, walking — looking at the cosmic face and listening to the cosmic voice of God. It refers to a dynamism of finding and hearing the animate and inanimate "images" of God in the universe, and responding "Amen", "Here I am"



(Gen 15:16; 22:1). He can see beings and perceive Being, hear voices and understand the voice (cf. Is 6:9) – thus to be endowed with Yahweh's vision which enables the creatures to "live, move and have their being" (Acts 17:28) in Being. This life style will bring a radical transformation in his perspectives: liberation from his microcosmic ideas and ideals to God's macrocosmic vision. The second covenant clause "to be blameless" refers to the call to be an integral, total and authentic person, which consists in imparting God's blessings to others, spending oneself at the service of creation, thereby growing into the living image of God whose life is expressed in total giving of himself. Thus Abraham's covenant call exhibits God's vision for humanity.

#### 1.4. d. Yahweh's programme for his people

1.4.1. The story of Israel, Abraham's children as a community begins with God's programmatic event of liberation out of Egypt<sup>8</sup>. The Lord listened to the lamentation of the exploited and alienated Hebrew slaves and came down to their rescue (Ex 3:7-9). He revealed himself as Yahweh, who "becomes" one with the marginalized masses, who enters into the existential context of life of the repressed by making their history his own story. Their poverty and misery are made his own concern. Their tears and sighs become his own sufferings. The feudalistic enemy as symbolised in Pharaoh is considered as his own personal adversary. The pedagogy of liberation started with the conscientization process against the opiate evil structures of the Egyptian Empire: its economics of affluence, politics of oppression and exploitation and the static and triumphalistic religion. Moses exposed the dangers of the tenacious designs of Egypt, the fruit of which will be a life-long economic, political and religious servitude. There ensued Yahweh-Pharaoh confrontation on three levels. The ten plagues refer to the theological, political and socio-economic dimensions of the dynamics of destabilization of the imperialistic structures of Egypt<sup>9</sup>, which at the end saw the reversal of social fortunes: the rich were left empty while the poor came away enriched.

1.4.2. Yahweh called this liberated people from servitude to service by concluding with them a covenant (Ex:19

24) which brought to fruition the dreams of Yahweh for the humankind. There came into existence a radically new society with Yahweh as its God in the tribal meaning of the term — one who stands and lives for his beloved, with providing, guiding, protecting and avenging functions (Gen 28:20-21). This envisaged a most intimate form of fellowship, as expressed in the covenant formula “I am yours, you are mine”<sup>10</sup>. Yahweh exclusively belonged to them and they were called to totally belong to him as his cherished possession, royal priests and holy nation. The idea of treasured property indicates a very intimate body-soul relationship. They are “holy” — separated for service of other nations. As Yahweh’s priests they have to become the mediators of the divine blessings. The altruistic orientation is projected as the symbol and guarantee of their covenant rootedness in Yahweh.

**1.4.3.** Yahweh’s covenant vision envisages a charismatic community of brothers and sisters who enjoy equal rights and share equal responsibilities. The nascent egalitarian tribal movement was to be grounded on the divine economics of equality, politics of justice and compassion and a religion of God’s freedom which rejected the concept of a passive or detached prisoner God who would be controlled by whimsical political and cultic authorities.

The covenant ideal provided an organizing pattern of the Israelite society<sup>11</sup>. Instead of the class orientated system of the neighbouring nations the covenant law endorsed an extended free family fraternity structure. Law code stood for elimination of all kinds of oppression and injustice. The cause of the poor, needy and helpless is advocated. God is said to take sides with the oppressed irrespective of nationality and religion (see Ex 22:22, 26; Dt 24:10:22). Even the aliens and enemies come under the concepts of brotherhood and love (Ex 22:20; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34). Also the Holiness code shows strong social flavour: see Lev 17-26, especially 19:1-33 and 25:23-55. It puts forward a revolutionary idea concerning the concept of private property: “The land is mine and you are but aliens who have become my tenants” (Lev 25:23). Although the people of Israel are given the land as the sacrament and guarantee of Yahweh’s abiding presence<sup>12</sup> this does not entitle anyone to exclusively possess it as his own. Nobody can

claim to be a landlord. The idea of absolute and permanent rights on land or property is to be rejected and delegitimized as inhuman blasphemy and utter falsehood. Yahweh demanded the allotment of land in equal measure to each clan and family (Num 26:52-56; 33:54). During the Jubilee year the property is to be restored to the original owner (Lev 25:10, 13, 23-38). It is a time to redress the balance, to rebuild the egalitarian community ideal.

**1.4.4.** Covenant laws advocate perfect brotherhood and freedom. Still the harsh human realities are reckoned with, for which practical laws are issued. Hebrews should not make confrères slaves, since all of them stand before Yahweh as equals owing service to him (Lev 25:55). Concerning those who had sold themselves as slaves, the Law provides them the status of hired workers and temporary residents (Lev 25:39-43). They enjoy equal share in cultic functions (Ex 20:10; 23:12; Dt 16:11,14; Ex 12:14). They should be freed on the Sabbatical year, for, "remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord God redeemed you" (Dt 15:12-18; Ex 21:2-6). While other feudalistic societies imposed harsh laws on fugitive slaves, Dt 23:15-16 made a crime to return an escaped foreign slave. Kidnapping someone into slavery merited capital punishment (Dt 24:7; Ex 21:6).

A group of laws aims at the social uplift of the poor: interest free loans (Ex 22:24; Dt 23:20f), debt release (15:1-6), harvesting and fallowing (24:19-21; Ex 23:10; Lev 19:9-10; 25:1-7; 18-20). Hardening the heart or being tightfisted attitude towards the downtrodden are condemned (Dt 15:7-11). It is a sin to refuse to lend the poor whatever they need and without interest. Ex 23:6 warns the judges against bending justice in order to rob a poor man of his right, Ex 23:6.

**1.4.5.** Yahweh's championing the cause of the marginalized finds expression in most of the covenant laws. Mistreating the defenseless is an offence against him. "I will slay you with the sword and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans." (Ex 22:21-23) He condemns in severest terms coveting the land of widows and defrauding them in civil cases (Dt 10:18; 27:19). Yahweh's cherished work consists in executing

judgement of orphans and widows, and giving food and clothing to the aliens whom he loves (Dt 10:18). He exhorts the covenant community to have a special concern for the orphans (Ex 22:22; Dt 10:18; 24-17).

**1. 4. 6.** The cultic vision of the Book of Leviticus is embedded in social equalitarian perspective. Yahweh considers worship an abomination if it is divorced from moral and social commitment to society. Priestly legislation results from the vision of cosmos being created by Yahweh in a very orderly way. Tabernacle guarantees God's living presence which will protect Israel against natural and historical chaotic evils. The community has to respond to it by observing the cultic laws which will help to maintain the harmony in its social life. Priestly legislation has developed an elaborate network of social significations that correspond to a social system with hierarchical system of priests, Levites, laity, resident aliens and slaves. This is meant to help the community to correct its behaviour in socio-economic context.

The laws of Deuteronomy were intended to orientate the life of people in the land, the symbol of God's presence in their life. Social injustices will pollute the land and provoke the Lord to deprive them of the land.

### **1. 5. e. Davidic metaphor and Yahweh's design**

**1. 5. 1.** Yahweh's dynamics of blessing got regalized in Davidic dynasty. In the place of charismatic tribal community of covenant fraternity Israel had opted for the monarchic system. Yahweh reluctantly yielded to their demand and brought out the manifesto of kingship. While other cultures divinized the king and made him inaccessible and unaccountable to the people, the Biblical ideal presented him as the champion of the marginalized. Ps 82:3-4 states the *raison d'être* of monarchy: It is meant to "defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the poor and the oppressed, rescue the afflicted and the destitute, deliver them from the hand of the wicked". King represented Yahweh as his servant ('*ebed*); in Yahweh's place "he shepherds the flock with justice" (Ez 34:16) into rich pastures (Ps 23). He undertakes to do the very works of God. The Lord chooses him and the people acclaim him.



**1.5.2.** Yahweh found in David a "man after his own heart" (I Sam 13:14). David ardently wished to build a house for the Lord and Yahweh promised him an eternal "house" (2 Sam 7:5-16). The two houses, Davidic kingdom and Divine reign are inter-related. Loyalty to the royal ideology which consists in commitment to "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer 33:15) will see the blooming of Davidic Kingdom. And this very loyal act will bring God's Kingdom on earth. The biblical concepts of justice and righteousness point to the restoration of the primeval harmony between God and human, human and human, human and animate/inanimate beings. An act of judgment which brings salvation to the victims of socio-political and economic-religious repression and rejection is implied here. This will bring into fruition God's creational vision.

**1.5.3.** Yahweh's promise does not presuppose any merit — neither in physical nor in mental nor social level — from the part of David. The insignificant or marginalized member of the family (I Sam 16:11), "the little thing" (II Sam 7:19) is made great by Yahweh! II Sam 7:5-16 recounts the blessing dynamics of God, motivated by his "steadfast love" (II Sam 7:15) and 'goodness' (V.28). The eternal dynastic covenant stands as the culmination of Yahweh's blessings (Ps 89:20-38). Davidic covenant exhibits a familial context. Covenant is envisaged as a father-son relationship (II Sam 7:14 "I will be his father, and he shall be my son"). Yahweh shows paternal concern for Davidic family; his attitudes of blessing, exhorting and disciplining are motivated by affection. Yahweh commits himself to David and posterity. He trusts David and entrusts him with creation to rule over it (cf. Gen 1:28) and to transform it into a new heaven and a new earth, bearing the name: "Yahweh is our righteousness" (Jer 33:16). Here David is a metaphor of the authentic human being, the covenant community of royal priests (Ex 19:5). According to Yahweh's design this king of creation will tend the cosmic beings like a shepherd, gather the weak and sick in his arms, carries the wounded close to his heart (cf. Is 40:11). The text admits a sociological interpretation. The dearest ones are those who are victimized by the unjust structures of the society. The covenanted David is ordained for the cause of these downtrodden and outcasts.

Judging and uprooting the undivine structures which have condemned the *majority* of God's people to an inhuman uncovenantal life — this was the mission of an ideal king.

**1.5.4.** Davidic metaphor slowly assumed Messianic overtones. Prophets announced the coming of a new David; he will fully realize the vision of Yahweh: Is 9:6-7; 11:1-9; Mic 5:2-5; Jer 23:5-6; Ez 34:23; 34:24-25.

“With righteousness he will judge the needy,/ With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth./ He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;/ With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” (Is 11:4)

And in the person of Jesus, “the son of David” (Mt 8:8) these words became flesh.

#### **1.6.f. Towards a new covenant community - perspectives**

**1.6.2.** *Prophetic portrayal:* The OT Prophets had in vivid colours portrayed the blessed future life of the cosmic community. Here we find the articulation of Yahweh's vision for a new creation. His new covenant of peace (Jer 31:31-34; Ez 11:19-20; 34:25-31; 37:26-28) will re-establish in a most radical way the blessed life of the primeval times (Is 9:2-5; 11:6-9; 25:6-8; 65:17-25). Misery and sorrow will be wiped out. In this new heavens and new earth adamah will yield rich crops. There will reign perfect harmony between the creatures. Yahweh will prepare a feast of rich food for the peoples — the best of meats and finest of wines. In this era of rejoicing all will enjoy long life. Instruments of war will have no place in this community of fraternity and equality. The earth will be full of knowledge of Yahweh. Justice and righteousness will be established. Here the coming Kingdom of God is sketched out with material colours, the earthly bliss being the metaphor, pledge and medium of heavenly happiness.

**1.6.2.** *Jesus: God's vision in human form:* In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the symbol of the new humanity, the prophetic dream found its fulfilment. The Kingdom of God has come in him... Jesus realized in his person God's vision for his creation.

**1.6.2.1.** The song of angels at the *birth* of Jesus (Lk 2:14)

illustrates God's manifesto of His Kingdom. The barriers that separated the realities of heaven and earth, God and human, glory and peace (the parallel members of the song) are destroyed. In new Adam, man/woman achieves *shalôm*, wholeness<sup>13</sup> which brings glory to God. The human becomes an unfragmented and unfabricated being like God. He enjoys amity in his horizontal and vertical relationships. He is blessed with intimate fellowship with the Creator as well as with animate and inanimate creatures.

1.6.2.2. The programmatic summary of Jesus' proclamation of the good news of God's salvific presence in the world, as reported by Mark (1:15) demands *conversion* (Hebrew *shûb*) as the prerequisite for entering the Kingdom. The Hebrew verb denotes different dimensions of turning to God<sup>14</sup>. First of all the act implies the whole person in his socio-economic, cultural, and cultic milieu, with his physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual attitudes and aptitudes. Secondly it involves others – the whole humankind. Thirdly it extends to other animate and inanimate beings in creation. The human is asked by Jesus to bring the entire cosmos to God. The whole universe, under his leadership, radiating the blessing dynamics of God has to be transformed into the divine face and voice in the act of celebrating the creative and covenant praises. This human *Sakṣātkara* has taken place in Christ, the new Adam. He, the perfect *shub* of creation, serves the paradigm and pledge for human's turning to God. In him human and divine milieus meet and merge.

1.6.2.3. Though son of God by nature (Jn 10:30; 17:10) he declined to cling to the divine condition (Phil 1:6) but opted for the status of the poor, the destitute and the marginalized – with the preferred title "Son of Man". In this "mediator of the *new covenant*" (Heb 9:15; 12:24) humans become God's children – a status which enables them to cry out "Abba" Father (Gal 4:3-7). In the heart of the new Adam the symbol of the new humanity, God has engraved his law of love (Jer 31:31-34). This covenant family in Christ was knit together in horizontal and vertical communion and communication, enjoying equality in rights and duties. In Jesus there emerged a radically new society without cultural, cultic, classist or sexist distinctions and discriminations (Gal 3:27-28).

**1.6.2.4.** Jesus, “the first-born over all creation” (Col 1:15) gave form to a new community, who being endowed with the *blessing* dynamics of God, is in the process of transforming the cosmos into a blessed creation (cf. Gen 12:2-3). This new creature reflects the “wholeness” (*tamim*) of his Father (Mt 5:48) which finds expression in the total act of filling others with his well-being or blessing. And this blessing gets its concrete form in *life*. Indeed, the Lord is the God of ‘living’, not of the dead (Mk 12:27) the personal God who entered into the lives of the Patriarchs and came to be known as the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex 3:6). “I have come that they might have life in totality” – exclaimed Jesus (Jn 10:10). This does not refer merely to longevity or pure survival, but to abundant life in all its aspects. Physical, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, cultural and social dimensions enter here. It brings together both the terrestrial and celestial milieus. Life signifies wealth and health, prosperity and pleasure – all of which reflect the living and loving presence of God of history. An egotistic welfare at the expense of others is not meant here; rather, it involves a life created and enjoyed in fellowship for the welfare of the covenant community.

## **2.0.0. B. Critique and confrontation**

**2.0.1** God’s endeavour to create heaven on earth, to bring his kingdom to the world, met with resistance from humankind. God responded to these negative reactions by words and actions. He admonished and indicted, rejected and destabilized the adamant rebels and systems.

**2.0.2** We could identify Yahweh’s marginalizing dynamics in the stories of primeval history. Ancestor traditions carry Yahweh’s social critique. The tribal life of Israel before the rise of monarchy — periods of wilderness, conquest and settlement — bears witness to the kerygma of criticism against the social aberrations of the covenant people. This study does not deal with these pre-monarchic periods. It focuses on the critique and confrontation in monarchic times.

### **2.1 a. Prophetic protest in monarchic times**

**2.1.1** *Solomonic context:* During Solomonic era Israel grew into a booming economic empire. There occurred political centralization and social stratification<sup>15</sup>. This social stratification policy



produced a luxuried and privileged small upper class who lived at the expense of ordinary people. Thus economics of equality as envisaged in Yahweh's covenant vision was undermined.

**2.1.2**     *Structural sinfulness of Northern Kingdom:* The oppressive economic and political policies of Solomon paved the way for the revolt of the exploited masses, organized by Jeroboam under the instigation of the prophet Ahijah (I Kg 11:29-39; 12:1-20). Omri dynasty had their own military and political ambitions which resulted in more taxation and corvée and impoverishment of the people. Ahab's family systematically engaged in socio-economic exploitation, expropriation of citizens' properties and methodical murders (I Kg 21). A military coup sparked by Elisha the prophet saw the end of Omri dynasty. Jehu, the emergent king could not destroy the existing socio-economic evils of the society<sup>16</sup>. Jeroboam II brought Israel to the peak of prosperity, the fruits of which, however, were enjoyed by a few privileged upper class. The peasant majority ended up as tenant farmers, debt servants, or landless wage labourers.

**2.1.3.**     *The roaring rebels:* On this flagrant violation of covenant ideals, prophets like Elijah, Amos and Hosea vehemently protested. They virulently attacked, rejected and delegitimized the 'feudalistic' structures of the Israelite society<sup>17</sup>.

**2.1.3.1.**     Elijah fearlessly condemned the royal policies of systematically dismantling the covenant egalitarian socio-economic dimension of Israelite society. He opposed King Ahab to his face (I Kg 18: 16-18) and denounced him: "you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh." (I Kg 21:20) He challenged the politics of religion of the foreign queen Jezebel and passed the sentence on her and Ahab's family<sup>18</sup>: "Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of the Jezreel. Dogs will eat, those belonging to Ahab..." (I Kg 21:23-24).

**2.1.3.2.**     Amos proclaimed Yahweh's total rejection of Israel, the entire superstructure and society<sup>19</sup>. He found corruption and social sin in court procedures (Am 2:7, 5:10,12; 2:6; 8:6) and in the life style of the leading classes (3:12,15; 5:11; 6:8, 11; 4:1; 6:4-6; 6:1, 3, 13). With undeterred passion Amos roared at the arrogant hypocrisy and practical atheism of the religious leaders who used religion as opium of the poor and the exploited (5:4, 21-23; 4:4-5).

**2.1.3.3.** *Hosea* encountered a band of leaders who were only interested in seizing every advantage at the expense of others. He epitomized the northern kingdom as a land of economic greed and plunder (cf 12:8-9).

**2.1.4.** *Social evils in the Southern Kingdom:* Southern socio-political hierarchy also systematically eviscerated Yahweh's radical covenant vision of a theocentric society of communal equality. The social stratification policy of society created a wide gap between the rich and the poor. The sacredness of the person and property was violated. Small landholders were expelled from their only means of livelihood. Dishonest business practices thrived. City centres were converted into nerve centres for robbery and bloodshed of the defenseless people.

**2.1.5.** *Denouncing dynamics of the Prophets:* We find a long list of prophets who arrayed themselves against the structural sinfulness of the royal state of Judah: Micah, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

**2.1.5.1.** *Micah:* "I am full of authority, justice and courage to declare to Jacob his rebelliousness, and to Israel his delinquency" (3:8). This prophet of justice tore away the masks of the ruling class and religious leaders, judges and preachers<sup>20</sup>. He championed the cause of "my people" – the defenseless women and children, the hard pressed husbands and fathers. He uttered woe oracles against those who "covet fields and seize them; houses and take them away; they oppress man and his family, man and his inheritance" (2:1-2). Strangely, these egotists declaimed confidence in salvation (2:7). Now Micah answers them back by exposing the hypocrisy of these alleged guardians of faith. He indicts the cannibalism of prosperity of those who are responsible for justice in Jerusalem (3:1-4). He turns against the religious class of his time who arbitrarily reinterpreted the word of God for their selfish motives and private whims (3:5-8). The political authorities are denounced: "you abhor justice and twist what is straight". They, together with priests and prophets, dedicate themselves to financial gain and fool themselves with verbal devotion to Yahweh. Here comes Micah's biting indictment: "Therefore, because of you Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and the temple mount will be given over to the beasts of the forest" (3:9-12).

**2.1.5.2.** *Isaiah of Jerusalem* was called to speed up the coming judgement on the ruling class and the people of Judah (Is 6:9-10). He virulently denounced the rampant violation of the rights of the ordinary citizens. The prophet mercilessly castigated the "blood-guilty" (1:15; 5:7) leaders who, ignoring the covenant charter of social justice and equality, were lustfully engaged in amassing wealth and political power (1:12-17; 3:13-15; 5:1-7,8-10). But the words of indictment were of little avail. It served to make their hearts hardened (1:10). Isaiah, finally announced the total destruction of the Kingdom which only could bring to an end the existing perverse structures of the society

**2.1.5.3.** *Nahum, Zephaniah and Habakkuk* worked out the problematic of the justice of God in the context of political events and regimes. Unfaithfulness of Judah is highlighted as well as the evils of the imperial powers. Nahum qualified Assyria as "the bloody city, all full of lies and booty" (Nah 3:1). He warned that "Yahweh will by no means clear the guilty" (1:3). Zephaniah sharply criticized the iniquities in Judah (Zep 1:1-6, 8-13) and uttered oracles against the ruthless foreign conquerors (2:4-3:8). The prophet envisaged a remnant who "will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths" (3:13). Habakkuk pointed out the injustice in Judah for which she would be punished (Hab 1:1-11). "Behold the one who is not upright in his very being shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness." (2:4)

**2.1.5.4.** *Jeremiah* was ordained mainly as a prophet of doom "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow" (Jer 2:10) the existing social and religious structure of the society. He found the situation of Judah hopeless: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (13:23). For him to "know" (i.e., accept, to be loyal to) Yahweh meant "to defend the cause of the poor and needy" (22: 16) - the marginalized people of the society. Jeremiah bluntly told the people that lip service to the Sinai covenant traditions and the Jerusalem cult provided no basis for political security in the absence of social justice. The prophet lashed out at those "whose eyes and hearts are set only on dishonest gain and

on oppression and extortion" (22:17), "who build palace by unrighteousness, upper rooms by injustice, making the country, men work for nothing, nor paying them for their labour" (22:13), "who are nestled in Cedar buildings" (22:23). He delivered scathing charges against the prophets who were at the service of the royalty (23:9-32). Jeremiah turned against the temple and Jerusalem: "I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth" (26:6). Against the king and his coterie of Jerusalem who for their selfish motives violated the covenant and enslaved the Hebrews of the low strata of the society. Jeremiah thundered: "Yahweh proclaimed 'freedom' for you, freedom to fall by the sword, plague and famine" (34:17). He advocated a radical thinking which could detach the people's future from institutions of monarchy and cult.

**2.1.5.5.** *Ezekiel* preached unmitigated disaster and asserted that Yahweh would destroy the political and religious institutions of Judah in order to vindicate his holiness and honour<sup>21</sup>. Never did there exist in the history of Israel a period of covenant loyalty. From their very origin the people failed in their covenant commitment to Yahweh (Ez 20:4-9). Now Yahweh was rejecting his own place of worship. The temple and the city would be destroyed. Yahweh would hover over his people in exile; threateningly for the arrogant, and protectively for the repentant. Ezekiel as the watchman of God (3:17-22; 33:1-20) tried to guide the exiles to recognition of their guilt and to repentance. The prophet depicted a new era where a new community with the Spirit of God (36:26-30; 37:24-27) would live a loyal covenant life as the true people of Yahweh in justice and fraternity.

## **2.2. b. Social criticism during the time of dispersion and restoration**

Here we deal with the exilic and post-exilic prophets as the champions of the marginalized, the socio-historic horizons in Nehemiah and critique in the Books of Lamentations, Psalms and Proverbs.

**2.2.1.** *Champions of the marginalized:* The prophetic voices of Deutero-Isaiah, Zechariah, Trito-Isaiah, Malachi, Obadiah



and Joel were heard during the period of dispersion and restoration.

**2.2.1.1.** *Deutero-Isaiah* was engaged in the slow and painful process of reeducation and transformation of the exilic people. He uses the literary form of trial speech against Israel (Is 42:18-25; 43:22-28; 50:1-3) to convince her of her sinfulness and to stop her self-justification. The Disputation speech serves as a rebuking rebuttal of the people's allegation of divine injustice. The Ebed Yahweh songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) describe the oppression and vindication of the Servant. There occurs an ironic reversal of apparent strength and weakness into their actual opposites. The oppressed Servant will bring the divine justice and righteousness to all the nations. He will champion the cause of the marginalized of the society (42:3). The eyes of the blind will be opened, the captives will be freed from prisons, and those who sit in darkness will be released from the dungeon (42:7). The prophet depicts Israel's deliverance in socio-political specificity. All the nations are said to participate in this radical new socio-historic situation (42:1,7; 49:5-6; 51:4-5; 55:3-5).

**2.2.1.2** *Zechariah* prefaces his visions with a call to repent and to abandon the stubbornness towards Yahweh (Zec 1:2-6). He upbraided the people of Bethel for selfish motives both when they fasted and when they feasted (7:1-3). Feast days have to be occasions to live justly (8:18-19).

**2.2.1.3** *Trito-Isaiah* opens up his message with these words: "Maintain justice and do what is right" (Is 56:1). The prophet raises his voice against those who monopolize and abuse power by doing wrong to fellow Jews. He turns against those who exercise a strangle-hold on the cult. These apparent ardent devotees are engaged in systematic socio-economic oppression and outright bloodshed. For the prophet the true fast consists in loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing the food with the hungry, providing the poor wanderer with shelter and clothing the naked (58:6-7).

**2.2.1.4.** *Malachi's* six oracles take the form of disputations with priests and the socio-economic and political elite. The latter are indicted for divorcing their wives thereby condemning them to a life of misery and for taking foreign wives to enhance

their socio-political status (Mal 2:10-16). The day of Yahweh will fall on those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and orphans and deprive aliens of justice (3:5).

**2.2.1.5.** *Obadiah* 1-15 condemns Edom for looting the land and seizing fugitive Judahites. Under the figure of an army of locusts *Joel* seems to refer to a foreign army who devastated the country. The oppressive nations are judged in chapter 3.

**2.2.2.** *Nehemiah on reconstruction of the society:* There existed in the post-exilic Judahite community class division between the wealthy who were advantaged by Persian-backed privileges and a more impoverished populace of small landholders<sup>22</sup>. Nehemiah, as the champion of true Yahwism, engaged himself to reconstruct the society according to the covenant ideal. He tried hard to alleviate socio-economic hardship among the populace. He stopped the profit-making agricultural and commercial undertaking of the wealthy on the Sabbath day. He adamantly opposed the politically motivated foreign marriages contracted by the upper class. He aroused public opinion against the harsh creditors (Neh 5:1-13), and one-time cancellation of debts was implemented. The impoverished temple assistants were given a portion of offerings to subsidize their livelihood. Nehemiah himself waived his own rights as governor to a food allowance and forty shekels of silver. He did not acquire any land (5:14-19).

**2.2.3.** *Critique in Lamentations, Psalms and Proverbs*

**2.2.3.1.** A hermeneutical reading of *Lamentations* will shed light on its socio-political context. The covenant curses for failing to live the covenant vision of Yahweh's community (Dt 28) have fallen on the people. The destruction of Jerusalem served as a horrible but deserved punishment for the covenant infidelity of Israel (Lam 1:5, 8, 14, 15, 18, 20, 22; 3: 42; 4:5; 5:7, 16). The religious authorities have spilled "the blood of the righteous" (4:13; 2:14). Jerusalem is compared to a bereaved mother whose children have been killed, starved, driven away or humiliated. A wretched situation prevailed in the country. The thirsty infant's tongue sticks to the root of its mouth; the weeping of the hungry children who beg for bread, is heard in the streets (4:4). Women and virgins are being raped; young men toil at the milestones; boys stagger under

loads of wood (5:10-13). The lamentation assumes the tenor of veiled prophetic protest at this pathetic situation.

**2.2.3.2** Behind the rhymes of orientation, disorientation and reorientation which are expressed in *Psalms* in a psychic level<sup>23</sup>, one can detect patterns of orientation to a just social order as envisaged in covenant ideal of God's community, disorientation and destabilization of the creational and covenant order through mass injustice, and reorientation of the community by overthrowing the inhuman and undivine structures<sup>24</sup>. Psalmist celebrated the order of life as intended by God in creation, liberation and covenant commitment. Individual righteousness or iniquity is evaluated from the community perspective as creating the blessed covenant life or undermining the existing social order. Behind the metaphoric and hyperbolic cultic language, there project out the socio-historic horizons of the *Psalms* – that of socio-economic oppression. Here is a world where the upper class systematically carries out false accusations and slander against the defenseless people, and deprive them of rights, means of subsistence, honour, and even of health and freedom. The rich trust and boast in their wealth and virtue. They spill innocent blood, seize the poor in ambushes, bring false testimony and shamelessly bribe judges. Oppression and fraud dominate the market place. Psalmists vehemently protest against and curse the pauperization of the populace, confiscation procedures, expropriation techniques and flagrant violation of covenant laws. Denunciation of the evils of economy of affluence stands out as one of the main-theme of many *Psalms*. Even physical illness seems to be associated with evil societal structures such as poor working and living conditions and social ostracism.

**2.2.3.3.** The Book of *Proverbs* exhibits different socio-economic appraisals. A main trend refers to oppression and dishonesty as the means by which the rich amass wealth. The riches are in effect stolen from the poor. The Book depicts as utter folly and sin against Yahweh, the acts of the rich who are engaged in extracting exorbitant interest on loans, moving the boundary markers of fields, judicial perjury and bribery, violent confiscations and killings of rightful owners (14:31; 28:27). The kings, by their permissiveness and complicity, are said to contribute to such a gross disorder. Many texts em-

phasize God's immediacy to the poor in creation and potential redemption (19:17).

Also the Books of *Job* and *Qoheleth* renounce riches as the product of plunder and murder.

### 2.3. c. **Jesus, the prophetic critic of social structure**

2.3.0. With the zeal for his Father's house (Jn 2:17) Jesus entered this world to realize God's vision for his covenant community. This meant first of all the extirpation of the huge dragon (Rev. 12), as symbolized by the evil socio-cultic structures of the society. Jesus virulently attacked, totally rejected and thoroughly delegitimized the stratified evils of the time. This he did by words and deeds. He took up the life-style, cause and struggle of the marginalized of the society.

2.3.1. As Yahweh came down to Egypt to champion the cause of the oppressed and exploited Hebrew slaves, so did Jesus come; he made his dwelling among the wretched and despondent underprivileged class of the society. Phil 2:7 sharply puts it: "He emptied himself and took the form of a *slave*." The shocking radicality of this action should not be diluted; Jesus lowered himself beyond the condition of the marginalized; he embraced the status of a slave – a mere 'thing' at the possession and mercy of another human being! Thereby he accounted "rubbish" (Phil 3:7) and disdained the existing socio-political and cultural-cultic values and virtues of the highly stratified society. Later he would bluntly tell his disciples who were lured by power and prestige motifs that he had come not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45). And he took on the condition of a slave by washing his disciples' feet. Paul describes the divine pedagogy of opting for the life of the outcasts: "for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty" (II Cor 8:9). Poverty of Jesus, however, needs qualification. It does not refer to a state which condemned him to lead a life of utter alienated dependence. Rather, Jesus enlisted himself as a "slave of justice" (Rom 6:18,19), a person wedded to the cause of justice who could call out: "Stand erect, hold your heads high, your time of liberation has come" (Lk 21:28).

2.3.2. Jesus embraced a *life-style* which proclaimed his un-



swerving solidarity with the marginalized of the society. The inhuman circumstances of his birth (Lk 2) were followed by the politics of terror and the systematic liquidation of the eventual opponents by the tyrannical regime (Mt 2). Jesus lived up to the prophecy of Simeon as the one destined to the downfall of many in Israel (Lk 2:34). This homeless wanderer (Mt 8:20) defined his mission as dedication for the release of the helpless victims of socio-economic and politico-religious structure prisons (cf Lk 4:16-21). His rejection of honorary titles and prerogatives (Mk 10:17; Jn 6:15) amounted to criticism of the structural tendency of society to categorize people according to their social, moral or religious status, and thus building up divisive blocks among them. At Jordan he appeared as the paradigm of the repudiated and the despondent of human race (Lk 3:21). He worked as a carpenter, a profession scorned by the society (Mk 6:3). His table companionship was with publicans, sinners and prostitutes (e.g. Mk 2:15-17). It all reflected a two-fold polarization: an act of denouncing the unjust and undivine face of the socio-religious structure, and the proclamation of the good news of God opting for the down trodden of the world. It is the gospel of God marginalizing the marginalizers from his Kingdom. Further, theological reflection on the life-style of Jesus provides a picture of him as "the first-fruits" (I Cor 15:20,23) or archetype of the following Gospel personages: the *widow* who offered her 'mite' (Mk 12:41-44) whereby she gave herself, her life and *being* without calculation or reservation — the symbol of God's new covenant community of *being*; the figure of a *babe* who in the nakedness of his being confidently entrusts himself to the powerful hands of the Father and "hopes everything" (I Cor 13:7), thus becoming the existential parable of the newly born in the spirit, living already in and for the Kingdom. Jesus' portrait is projected behind the *pagan* characters of the wisemen at Bethlehem (Mt 2), Roman centurion at Calvary (Mk 15:39) and the Canaanite woman (Mk 7:24-30) who took the Kingdom by force or brought it into their life by exerting spiritual violence and moral vigour. He embraced the fate of the socially and religiously rootless and discriminated people like *tax collectors* and *prostitutes*. Jesus became the soul of the anguished and alienated man (Lk 22:

41-45). The tragedy, death and tears of human life are carried to God (Jn 11:38-42).

**2.3.3**     *The wretched* of the earth — who suffer physical, psychological, moral, intellectual, economic, social, cultural, territorial, political and religious alienation, deprivation, exploitation and oppression (Lk 6:20-23; Mt 5:3-12; 25:31-40) — are held by Jesus as the *highly favoured* (Lk 1:28) or *blessed ones* of God, his “treasured possession” (Ex 19:5) and “the apple of his eye” (Dt 32:10). Jesus opted them as his dearest sheep and shepherded them into the rich pastures of the Kingdom (Ps 23). These disorientated (Mk 6:34), hungry (8:2), harassed and helpless (9:35-36) folk encountered in him the leading (Jn 10:3-4), feeding, teaching and healing (Mt 14:6) Messiah.

These liberative acts involved a sharp critique of the structural hypocrisy of the society which cultivated pious numbness towards these social evils. The marginalized are proclaimed “blessed” (Mt 5:3-12) who will be privileged to enjoy the social benefits of the coming era of salvation. Reversal of social hierarchies (Mt 20:36; Mk 8:35; 9:35; Lk 9:48; 14:7-14; cf 1:51-53; I Sam 2:4-8) is the sign of the irruption of the Kingdom with the downfall of satanic structures (Lk 10:17-21) of arrogance and accumulation, might and money, consumerism and hedonism, security and self-complacency. And Jesus welcomes the dawn of the Kingdom with a hymn of jubilation.

Jesus rejected the orthodox concept of sanctification of sabbath which separated God from the existential social realm of human life (Mk 3:1-5; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn 5:1-13; 9:1-14). A person in socio-physical shackles of poverty, hunger or infirmity remains inhuman who in that condition cannot bring sanctification to God. Only his liberation from “the clutches of satan” (Lk 22:32) will make the day of the Lord holy. In the struggle of his disciples to fill out the empty bellies Jesus could see the distress of the starving masses of Palestine whom the structural injustices of the society has condemned to malnutrition or starvation (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-26). There and then the true God of history has been released from fetters and the Lord of sabbath has taken the side of the poor and the distressed.

**2.3.4.** Jesus by his words and actions attempted to *marginalize the affluent and arrogant politico-religious power structures* of his time. The populace was conscientized against their opiating influence. The authorities who subtly manipulated religion as a tool to perpetuate the socio-economic injustice (e.g. Mk 7:9-13; Mt 23:24-25) are mercilessly condemned. He rejected all forms of cult or religious practices which were divorced from justice (e. g. Mk 12:40; Lk 11:42). This amounted to the crucifixion of the true God in God's children. Here Torah was so interpreted as to make its practice almost impossible and utterly miserable for the simple people (e. g. Mt 23:4). This social critic raised his voice against imposition of subtle forms of class distinctions based on affluence and authority, in the structure of the society (e. g. Mk 12:38-39). Woes and curses were hurled at the custodians of these evils who personified the huge dragon (Mt 23:13-36). What emerged from the heart of these people, such as murder, greed, deceit... had contaminated the society (Mk 7:14-23). The desire for wealth and craving of other sorts had choked the word of God from their hearts (Mk 4:18-19). The parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) present the religious élite as having no eyes for the wounds of the downtrodden, nor ears for their cry. They are all eyes and ears for power, profit and prestige. These doers of the will of mammon had already closed their minds against God, and excluded themselves from the fellowship with christ (cf Mk 3:35; 10:23), hence are condemned to meet the divine indignation (cf Mk 3:5) and the fire of Gehenna (Mt 23:33). The temple which then symbolized a static and triumphalistic religion would be left to utter destruction (Mk13).

Jesus violently dashed against the devotees of Mammon and the promoters of capitalistic ideology. He could see then the signs of steady resurgence of the ancient exploitative hierarchical Canaanite power structures at the expense of the egalitarian covenant community ideal. "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6:24) – the embodiment of greed – this categorical statement rules out any possibility of compromise or co-existence between these rival camps. Either one has to recreate himself on the image and likeness of the idols of affluence, avarice and arrogance (cf Ps 115:4-8) and vow himself to possession, self-gratification and dominance, or to enter

into the liberating bondage of God, which frees him to risk himself, like his Master in giving himself to the cause of the outcasts. An analogous challenge is flung down in Lk 14:25-27. "If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yea, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." To be a radical rejector or traitor to one's socio-religious milieu - this is the cost of discipleship. It consists in "non-conforming yourself to this age" (Rom 12:2) of the wealth god. Jesus never hesitated to besiege, by words and actions, mammon's fortifications. He warned: "life is not assured by wealth", and demanded to avoid greed in all forms (Lk 12:15). The tragedy of the "camelised" (cf Mk 10:25) fool with his accumulated and unshared wealth (Lk 12:13-21) will be a haunting metaphor for all the generations. The rich gluttonous consumer will be eternally tortured in flames (Lk 16:19-31). "Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation." (Lk 6:24) The chronic misery of the rich which consists in their *being* isolated by their *having*, will rarely respond to treatment (Mk 10:17-27). Wealth has deprived them of the ability to be mobile with Jesus: to give, to share, to enter into the economic and social milieu of the poor, which will make hard for them to enter the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:23). In the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) Jesus challenged the rich to find the freedom to be a true *being* in the likeness of God. Paul was stripped off his entire Pharisaic inheritance which meant the end of an established existence, and of social and religious security (Acts 9:1-22). He was liberated to enter into the dynamics of God's liberating gift of covenant community. Jesus violently destabilized the profit-making institutions (Jn 2:13-16). He disgustingly separated himself from the property disputes of the wealthy class (Lk 12:13-14). He predicted the destruction of the royal city which practised the politics of oppression and exploitation (Mt 23:37). The prophetic critic disdained the threat of the political powers who wanted to reduce him to silence (Lk 13:31-33).

### 3.0.0.

### C. From text to Context

**3.1** Jesus and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob challenge the Church, both global and Indian, to the creative and



liberative vision of this world. The living God wants to come down to the Indian society, liberate it from the inhuman and undivine structures and build up the Kingdom in which "love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Ps 85:10). The eternal *dābār* eagerly waits for the Indian Messiahs to release it from the prison of the written form so that it can "blow wherever it wills" (Jn 3:8), and assume an Indian face and voice. "Whom shall I send (Is 6:8) to render my word "sharper than any two-edged sword so that it can penetrate and divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (Heb 4:12) of the Indian society? — cries the voice. Prophetic voices should be heard in the dark alleys and dirty streets proclaiming the dynamics of God's blessing. God's Kingdom has come to this soil; and discriminations based on class and caste, colour and conventions, region and religion, sex and sects are being done away with, since "all are one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:28).

3.2. Here comes the prophetic function of denouncing and rejecting the evil stratifications that militate against the transformation of India into God's society which realizes an economics of equality, politics of justice and compassion, and a religion of love and liberty. Church is urged to come to the fore-front to conscientize the masses like Moses, against the opiate and corrosive character of the economic, educational and socio-political systems. India is in need of Elijahs who could condemn all categories of divinities who connive at injustice (Ps 82). Indian Amoses and Micahs should never allow the organized greed of socio-economic structural systems to destroy the only *living* image of God on this earth. Those who try to build into the economic and political fabric of life a structural situation of idolatry (cf. Ps 115) are to be systematically identified and alienated.

3.3. Church owes the people of India a tremendous responsibility to uphold the credibility of the Bible in the Indian

context. It is easy to succumb to the common temptation to promote a 'domesticated' Christ. Proclamation of peace in the communal India is well and good; but it should bring out the dynamic force of biblical *Shālôm* which is rooted in justice in all its domains. Hindu ideologies of *vairagya*, *nişkāma* and *nirguna* must be given an incarnated and contextualised dynamic force as to become the *élan vital* for constructing a just social structure in this soil.

3.4. "The power flowing from his resurrection" (Phil 3:10) will render the prophetic criticisms of the social structures of religion and political institutions authentic and audacious. The issue of the cost of discipleship enters here. It demands the courage to risk oneself without reservation, protection or guarantee. But how few are those who enter this narrow gate! (Mt 7:14)

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### Footnotes

1. See the Editorial where the global and Indian marginalizing situation is exposed.
2. On the criteria for recognizing false prophets. Cf. Hans Walter Wolf, *Confrontations with Prophets*, Philadelphia, 1983, pp. 63-76.
3. On the sociological methods in the study of the Bible, cf. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, Maryknoll 1983; *The Hebrew Bible - A Socio-Literary Introduction*, Philadelphia, 1985 Robert R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament*, Philadelphia, 1984; George E. Mendenhall. *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of Biblical Tradition*, Baltimore, 1973, I have heavily drawn on Gottwald's work for the ideas of this article.



4. On the Adamah motif in the primeval history of Yahwistic tradition, cf. Paul Kalluveettil, "The Transcending and Transgressing Man - The Dialectical Anthropology of Genesis I - XI", *Bible Bhashyam* 12 (1986) 85-99.
5. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, Atlanta, 1982, pp 101-13.
6. Cf. Paul Kalluveettil, "Prayer as Celebration", *Journal of Dharma* 10 (1985) 258-279, especially p. 274.
7. Cf. Paul Kalluveettil, "The Covenant Reality in the Hebrew Society", in *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a new Society*, ed. by, D. S. Amalorpavadass, Bangalore, 1981, pp. 510-19.
8. Cf. J. S. Croatto, *Exodus. A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, Maryknoll, 1981.
9. Cf. Juan Alfaro. "God Protects and Liberates the Poor" in *Option For the Poor (Concilium 187)* ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo Edinburgh, 1986, pp 27-35.
10. Cf. Paul Kalluveettil, "Covenant and Community", *Jeevadhara* 11 (1981) 95-104; *Declaration and Covenant* (AB 88), Rome, 1981, pp 93-111.
11. Cf. Paul Kalluveettil, "The Marginalizing Dialectics of the Bible", *Bible Bhashyam* 11 (1985) 201-14, especially pp. 206-09.
12. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, Philadelphia, 1977
13. The translation "peace" does not exhaust the richness of the Hebrew concept of *shalom*
14. Cf. Paul Kalluveettil, *Journal of Dharma* 10 (1985) 285-64
15. Cf. Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets. The Political Economy of Ancient Israel*, Boston, 1983.
16. Cf. Robert North, "Social Dynamics from Saul to Jehu" *BTB* 12 (1982) 109-19.
17. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia, 1974,
18. Cf. Francis I. Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident", *JBL* 85 (1966) 46-57.
19. Cf. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, pp. 353-58.

20. H. W. Wolff. *Confrontations with Prophets*, pp 35-38.
21. Cf. Walter Zimmerli, *I am Yahweh*, Atlanta, 1982.
22. Cf. Carl Schultz, "The Political Tensions Reflected in Ezra - Nehemiah", in *Scripture in Context*, eds. Evans, Hallo and White, Pittsburg, 1980, pp 221-44.
23. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1982.
24. Cf. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, pp. 537-41